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THE ADMIRAL'S WARD

MRS. ALEXANDER

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THE

ADMIRAL'S WARD.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER,

AUTHOR OF

'THE WOOING O'T,' 'HER DEAREST FOE,' 'WHICH SHALL IT BE?'

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE ADMIRAL'S WARD.

CHAPTER I.

HAVING accomplished her business visits satisfactorily, and found that her place had been supplied in only one instance, Laura bent her steps to Mrs. Trent's residence, having a good excuse for calling.

She had found an invitation for herself and the Admiral to Miss Trent's wedding; she decided to refuse it in person, and thus find the opportunity she sought. It was a little past luncheon-time, but the sedate man out of livery at once admitted her. She had scarcely reached the drawing-room, when Caroline, the second daughter, a merry little damsel of thirteen or fourteen, came running upstairs.

'Oh! Miss Piers, mamma says will you come in to luncheon? We have not finished yet—do come down!'

And Laura went down to the handsome dining-room.

'I am very glad indeed to see you,' said Mrs. Trent cordially, as she rose to meet her in her rich silk dress, delicate laces, and dead-gold ornaments, a picture of solid prosperity and content. 'When did you return? James, a chair here for Miss Piers. You came back yesterday? Very good of you to call so soon. What will you take? There is some cold roast lamb, and the remains of currie. These children will not eat currie. James, some lamb,' etc., etc.

'How is Miss Trent?' asked Laura.

'Oh! quite well—a little tired. She is staying with her future mother-in-law, at Bushy. Dear Mr. and Mrs. Thurston are so kind and so fond of her.'

There were only the three younger children and their governess at table, and these Mrs. Trent soon dismissed.

'Miss Merton, if you manage to get through all your work before tea, you shall have the open carriage for a nice drive this evening. I am only going a little way, and the horses will be quite fresh.'

'Oh, thank you, mother! Come along, Carry; come, Louie; let us make haste!' cried the youngest, a curly-headed rogue of about seven, to his sisters. And with hasty adieux to Laura, they scampered off, followed more sedately by their governess.

'Children are such a nuisance when you want to talk comfortably,' said Mrs. Trent; 'and I want to hear all about Pierslynn. We are to have the pleasure of seeing you and the Admiral at the wedding?'

Laura excused herself and her guardian; and Mrs. Trent, though she said all that was right and proper, did not press her invitation too vehemently.

'If you will not take anything more,' said Mrs. Trent, after Laura had refused a second supply of gooseberry-fool, 'let us go upstairs.'

And they settled themselves for a comfortable talk on the balcony of the smaller drawing-room, which was covered by an awning and liberally supplied with fragrant plants.

'Now tell me all about Pierslynn,' repeated Mrs. Trent, leaning back in a folding-chair and slowly fanning herself. 'I take quite an interest in Reginald and his young wife. They say he has been spending a heap of money lately.'

'I do not think that can be true,' said Laura. 'They live according to their station; but I saw no sign of extravagance.'

'I am glad to hear it. Well, what is the baby like?'

'A funny, puny-looking little thing; but it improved immensely before I left.'

'Mrs. Piers *mère* says it is a wonder it lived. I cannot understand that; young Mrs. Piers is the *beau-idéal* of a healthy young mother.'

'She is,' returned Laura; 'but she is sensitive and excitable.'

'Ah! so I believe,' said Mrs. Trent, with a degree of significance Laura could not help noticing. 'And they have a nice place?'

Laura gave a glowing description of it and Winifrid's happiness, her own enjoyment, and everyone's kindness.

'And—you will forgive me, dear Laura, if the question is intrusive; you know I am not prompted by idle curiosity—how did you and Reginald meet?'

'In unembarrassed friendliness,' said Laura, smiling and colouring a little. 'I think we are *both* glad we discovered the true state of his feelings before it was too late.'

Mrs. Trent looked at her with wide-open eyes, and slowly shook her head.

'You and your cousin Winifrid are most amazing people,' she said; 'and she is as great friends with you as ever? not at all jealous about her husband?'

'Winnie jealous of *me!*' returned Laura, with frank surprise. 'That would indeed be absurd!'

'Well, I do not know,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing; 'I can't help thinking that, were I a man, I should be very fond of you.'

'If you *were* a man you would not. I think some might like me; but I shall never again believe that anyone could fall in love with me.'

'Nonsense, my dear. There is a sort of soft repose in your manners, a kind of feeling in your

voice, that must be very attractive to many men.'

'Pray go on,' said Laura gravely; 'you will prove I am a beauty in time.'

'These personalities are very rude,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing. '*Revenons à nos moutons.* How does Winifrid bear her honours, and get on with the county?'

They again plunged into the Pierslynn question, and presently Laura brought the conversation round to the point she had waited for.

'There are some curious old portraits of various bygone Piers in a kind of gallery, and several more modern in the library. I found a Geoffrey Piers—my grandfather, I believe—among them.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' said Mrs. Trent, with a little reserve.

'Mrs. Trent,' said Laura, with some earnestness, 'I have never known much of my own family. Can you tell me in what degree I am cousin to Reginald?'

'Oh! I am by no means well up in such matters—third or fourth cousin—I suppose. I believe he is *my* third cousin once removed, to be accurate; but I do not know exactly where your father came in. I must show you some of Katie's pretty things before you go, Laura,' she added, with the evident intention of changing the subject.

'Thank you,' returned Laura. 'But I want first to understand whereabouts I come on the family-tree; though I fear I am neither fruit nor flower.'

'Ah! Let us say an acorn, with the germ of future greatness within you,' cried Mrs. Trent readily. 'Why trouble about such old-fashioned follies as genealogies and family-trees?'

'Yet I wish to know,' urged Laura, with gentle persistence. 'I have an idea that my father was not legitimate, which would account in some measure for Mrs. Piers being more ready to accept Winnie for a daughter-in-law than myself.'

'Well, I believe you are right,' returned Mrs. Trent a little reluctantly, 'though it was very stupid of anyone to tell you; for at this distance of time it is really of no consequence, and people have such narrow prejudices on the subject.'

'I think they are very natural prejudices,' said Laura. 'But now that we are over that difficulty, tell me something of this grandfather of mine.'

'I do not know much, and it is so difficult to explain relationships. Let me see: you and I, and Reggie, all had the same great-great-grandfather; no, he was *your* and Reggie's great-great-great-grandfather! How awkward not to have a word in English to express all these "greats"! This "urahn" Piers (as the Germans would say) had three sons; you and Reggie are descended from the second, and myself from the third—that is all I know; but I think I have heard Mr. Trent say that it was lucky for Reginald that your grandfather Geoffrey never married. Now are you satisfied?'

'I am.' She paused, and resumed in a few

moments in an altered, pained tone: 'Do you know anything of my grandmother?'

'Very little; she was a French Canadian, you know. Your grandfather was one of the unlucky Peninsular men who were sent off to America, and so missed Waterloo. I rather fancy she was of humble birth; at any rate, he never married her—more shame for him! But I see these historical reminiscences vex you. I imagined you had more sense; do not give it another thought. It is such an old story no one knows anything about it; you are just one of the family, no matter the exact degree.'

'But I am not. I can claim no tie with you! My only relatives are Winnie and her brothers.'

'Come! you must admit *my* claim,' said Mrs. Trent kindly and pleasantly. 'We shall all be ambitious to call you cousin, when you have reached the position to which your ability entitles you. I assure you I heard high praise of your talent a few days ago.'

'Where?' exclaimed Laura, in genuine surprise.

'At Mrs. Piers's, the dowager's. Mr. Trent and I were dining with her, to meet Reginald and a very charming Madame Moscynska, some relation of one of their Saltshire neighbours. She said she thought your work full of promise, and was sure you would yet take high rank; she seemed to understand what she was talking about. She is rather a remarkable woman, and quite fascinated Mr. Trent.'

'I am much obliged for her prophecy,' said Laura gravely.

'Her toilet is a study,' continued Mrs. Trent; 'only it suggests the idea of too elaborate care. Its arrangement must need a world of thought, a lifetime of experience. Yet it was worn easily enough. Mrs. Piers told me that Madame Moscynska wished to make my acquaintance, which rather surprised me; I should have imagined that quite professional people like ourselves were not likely to attract a fine lady such as she is. However, I called on her yesterday, or rather left my card, for she was out.'

Laura listened with an odd feeling of displeasure and uneasiness that made her vexed with herself. Why should she not like the idea of acquaintanceship between her pleasant friendly relative and the Polish princess? Why did she suspect Mrs. Trent, in her heart, of a weakness for grandees, albeit so frankly accepting her excellent middle-class position? It was one of those strange currents of thought, different in temperature and of contrary direction from the surrounding mental condition, which at times traverse it, as the Gulf Stream does the ocean.

'And Miss Trent's pretty things? You were so good as to say you would show them to me,' she said, rousing herself and resolutely turning away from the subjects of which they were speaking.

'Yes; I shall be delighted. It is like being married over again, having the care of all these

fine things,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing. 'Really, Reginald's gift is quite splendid—a lovely dessert service of silver and engraved glass! I believe, as Mrs. Piers could not come to town, Madame Moscynska helped him to choose it—she has perfect taste.'

* * * * *

After nearly an hour's inspection of the various presents, an hour far from uninteresting to Laura's womanly taste and instincts, she was obliged to hasten home in order to be in time for the four o'clock dinner provided by Mrs. Crewe's thoughtfulness.

Of course Mrs. Crewe was ravenous for a description of the preparations for Miss Trent's wedding, and delivered a carefully considered opinion that Laura would have done more wisely, and upheld her own position better, had she accepted Mrs. Trent's invitation to the ceremony.

'You are one of the family, my dear. Why should you not be one of the guests at your cousin's wedding? Your absence is a sort of admission that you are scarcely a relative.'

'I really do not care whether I am or not,' returned Laura, laughing; 'not enough, certainly, to expend the cost of a wedding garment.'

'My dear Laura,' said the Admiral, looking up from his plate, which Mrs. Crewe had liberally supplied with curried lamb, 'the claims of kindred should not be lightly disregarded. The family is a

divine institution, and the right to belong to one ought not to be thoughtlessly relinquished.'

'If I have a right I should certainly not give it up,' returned Laura, smiling slightly—a peculiar smile, that seemed to fix the Admiral's attention, for he continued to look at her with a questioning expression for another second.

'I am sure a new summer dress would not ruin you, Laura,' observed Mrs. Crewe, coming in with her blessed undercurrent of commonplace to sweep away the pin's point of light that for an instant gleamed on the Admiral's brain. 'If Mrs. Reginald Piers comes to town you will want a change; you cannot go about with her in your old black dress for ever.'

'We shall see,' returned Laura, evading the discussion; and then she led the conversation to her visits of that morning, and the satisfaction she experienced in finding that she had lost very little by her prolonged visit to Pierslynn. Finally the Admiral requested her to put on her hat and mantle, as they would not be too early for the charitable tea.

It was a somewhat long expedition to the north-eastern district. The evening was close and thunderous, and the room, though large, was crammed with not too well-washed boys and girls and tiny urchins, so that Laura found the atmosphere rather overpowering.

In spite of haste, the Admiral and his ward were a few minutes late, but the former was suffi-

ciently important to be waited for. Directly they had penetrated to the top of the room, Laura was given a seat among the leading female members of the congregation, while her guardian was invited to 'step up' on the platform. A broad-shouldered big man, with well-flattened, whity-brown hair, who had apparently twisted a small table-cloth round his huge throat, said, 'Let us join in prayer.' Whereupon everyone knelt down.

So soon as the tremendous rustling and scuffling which ensued had subsided, the speaker proceeded to deliver a long address to the Deity, confessing a cairn of sins and backslidings, and asking for a string of benefits, pleading for his spiritual opponents rather in the 'Don't nail his ears to the pump' style, and generally wrestling with the Evil One so vehemently that his shouts might have been heard afar; these gradually died off into pathetic moaning supplications, and after coming very often near the finish, and then starting afresh, he at last concluded, and the impatient children were permitted to attack the cakes, bread-and-butter, etc., which had divided their attention, and got the lion's share of it.

Then the distribution of viands began, and Laura grew interested in helping the little street-Arabs to buns and bread-and-butter, watching their weird, prematurely old faces, and contrasting this evening's meal and its surroundings with the fastidious elegance of her luncheon at Mrs. Trent's.

The excitement and bustle was tremendous.

The steam of many tea-kettles, added to the heat of the crowded room, made the atmosphere overpowering, and by the time the Admiral rose to address the meeting, Laura felt faint and dizzy. She managed to find a seat near the principal entrance, and waited with the trepidation which generally attends any public effort on the part of one dear to the listener.

At first the kindly gentleman was a little indistinct and hesitating; but soon warming with his subject, and deeply impressed with its importance, his voice grew firm, his language fluent, and his face lighted up with the consciousness of the blessed message he was empowered to deliver.

Seeing him thus secure of his audience, Laura, leaning back in her chair, her head resting against the wall, her hat supported on her knee, gradually lost sight of the present and the preacher. Her conversation with Mrs. Trent came back to her vividly, word for word, and this her first attempt to test the truth of the strange communication from 'our Antipodes' so far confirmed it. So far it was evident that, had her grandfather been just and true to the woman who must have loved him well, she herself would now be the possessor of Pierslynn, and all the beauties and luxuries she had admired without envying. But would this repay her for the destruction of her faith in human nature? If Reginald could be so base—so false—whom could she trust? And yet—did she not always know, deep down in her instinctive recog-

nition of Reginald's nature, that there must be some unacknowledged motive underlying his choice of herself? Nevertheless, she could not believe that he was coldly, deliberately false and dishonest. No, it was not possible that Reginald could have intentionally cheated her. Could any gain in lands or fortune make up to him for the loss of self-esteem such conduct must entail? Her heart beat suffocatingly at the idea of the bitter contempt which must replace her old admiration should this strange story prove true; and if it did, what could she do? Rob Winnie and her boy of their means of existence? Submit to the shameful wrong practised upon herself? Both seemed equally impossible. And what would Winnie say? would she ever believe her husband guilty? She must, by asserting herself, lose both friends. But it remained to be seen if this horrible, distressing tale were true. Before a week was over she would quietly examine into the facts communicated, and she almost prayed they would prove false. Then her thoughts grew confused—her brain seemed to burn. She saw Winnie—her baby in her arms—sorrowful, reproachful, sobbing out with tears, 'Is this revenge or justice?' or worse, turning revolted from her husband, their love and confidence shattered! and this would be her work.

The place swam before her—a painful rushing noise sounded in her ears, a dark film spread over her eyes. She had been greatly tried during the last three days, and she was obliged to ponder

these things in her heart, without the relief of confession or sympathy. It was a strain to which her strength was not quite equal. The platform and her guardian's figure grew dim and indistinct, a terrible consciousness that she was helpless even to ask help oppressed her, when some one touched her. A voice said, 'You are ill—let me help you out,' and a strong arm was round her. The next moment she felt a delicious current of fresh air, and coming to herself, she found Denzil Crewe and a large goodnatured-looking woman in a big bonnet with funereal feathers beside her, in an outer chamber or vestibule.

'You are all right now?' asked Denzil, whose eyes were fixed upon her with much eager anxiety, while he held a glass of water in his hand. 'Take a little more water.'

Laura obeyed.

'Did I faint?' she asked. 'I cannot remember.'

'Very nearly. Directly I came in I saw you were almost gone. We just managed to get you out. As soon as you are able to stand, we will be off home.'

'The heat and the emotion were no doubt too much for the young lady. It was a touching spectacle, and the excellent Admiral had improved the opportunity so admirably,' said the lady in the befeathered bonnet.

Laura turned and thanked her civilly for her kind attention.

'Do you think you can venture to walk a little

way?' asked Denzil, who seemed impatient to be gone.

'Yes. Oh yes! I should like to go home.'

Denzil took out his cardcase and scribbled a few lines on the back of a card.

'May I ask you to send this card to Admiral Desbarres as soon as he has finished speaking?'

This the lady promised to do; then arranging her hat and hair as well as she could, by a hand-glass brought her by the friendly matron, Laura, still feeling a little tottery, took Denzil's arm, and they sallied forth.

'I am afraid cabs are not easily to be found here,' said Denzil, looking round, 'and I am sure you are scarcely able to stand. I am surprised you could hold out as long as you did in such an atmosphere.'

'It was very oppressive, certainly,' returned Laura. 'Still, I do not understand being so faint; I never felt faint before.'

'I am quite sure your visit to Pierslynn has done you no good,' rejoined Denzil rather gruffly; 'you look a different creature from what you were when I came back.'

'Well, Pierslynn did me no harm,' said Laura, with a slight sigh.

'You are not leaning on me,' exclaimed Denzil; 'you are only touching my coat-sleeve with the tips of your fingers.'

'I am feeling quite strong now,' returned Laura.

'Nonsense,' said Denzil, more earnestly than

politely; 'you are still very shaky. Let us turn down this street to the left. I scarcely know my bearings, but I imagine it leads towards Gray's Inn Lane.'

'Gray's Inn Lane?' repeated Laura, struck by the name: 'whereabouts is that?'

'It is a long way from this, I fear; it leads, you know, from Holborn to the Great Northern; it is full of lawyers and legal gentry. Hallo! there's a cab! Stand here an instant—I will catch it;' and he darted away, returning soon with the captured fourwheeler.

The drive back was rather silent, and seemed to Laura interminable. Her brain felt confused, the prominent sensation being a pained anxiety.

When at length they reached Leamington Road, Collins announced that 'Missus was gone out with Miss Brown; and that everything was locked up.'

'That is a nuisance,' cried Denzil; 'you ought to have a glass of wine or something.'

'I want nothing whatever,' exclaimed Laura, sitting down on Mrs. Crewe's best sofa; 'the quiet and freshness of this pleasant room is enough.'

'When did my mother say she would return?'

'She never said nothing about coming back, sir; but I did hear Miss Brown say, as they were going out of the door, something about catching the ten train, and I was told to have everything ready for supper by ten o'clock.'

'Very well—all right, Collins;' and Collins disappeared. 'The mother seems to have gone off on

a private spree,' said Denzil. 'I am glad you will be looking better by the time she comes in. She would have been startled if she saw your white face.'

'I am really quite recovered, and when I have arranged my hair and bathed my brow, I shall look as well as I ever do,' returned Laura, rising and speaking as bravely as she could. But the weak flesh failed to support the willing spirit; even in uttering the words her voice broke, and she burst into irrepressible tears.

'Sit down again,' cried Denzil, taking her hand and drawing her back to the sofa. 'If you go away upstairs by yourself, you will be fainting when you are alone, and God knows what! I wish my mother were here!' He stopped, looked with a rueful expression at Laura, who felt powerless to restrain her tears and hardly able to stand, yet terribly ashamed of herself; and then he began to walk up and down the room in a troubled fashion. 'I wish you wouldn't cry like that,' he exclaimed at last; 'it is awful. Look here, Laura! if there is anything vexing you—anything on your mind, you know—just tell me; look on me as a brother. I would do all in my power to help you. Something extraordinary must have happened to distress you. This is not like your usual strength and self-control.'

'I am very much ashamed of my weakness, and of troubling you,' said Laura brokenly. 'I never behaved so badly before; the heat of that place was too much—the——'

'Yes,' interrupted Denzil, resuming his quarter-deck walk while a cloud gathered over his brow; 'you have overtasked your strength in every way; you are but human, after all, Miss Piers! and your visit to Pierslynn was an imprudence—it was more than your cousin ought to have asked; but I am probably meddling with what does not concern me. I thought—I thought you were more steeled against old impressions——' He stopped abruptly, and stood gazing out of the window.

The extreme surprise his words caused her checked Laura's tears, and gave a new turn to her thoughts. The friendly confidential tone in which they had of late been accustomed to treat each other prevented her from feeling that Denzil was taking a liberty in speaking thus; but the impatience and odd irritation in his voice and manner wounded her a little; she felt so bruised, so fooled, so betrayed, where she had put fullest faith, that she was more than usually disposed to cling to the kind, unpretending, straightforward sailor, whose friendliness appeared so brotherly and so sincere.

That he should be disposed to blame her in some inexplicable way seemed too hard.

'I do not think I quite understand you,' she returned, speaking more steadily. 'I have been troubled, just lately, in a somewhat unexpected way, but my visit to Pierslynn has nothing to do with it. It is something widely different, and when I can decide how to act, I shall no doubt feel at

rest. Are you displeased with me for any reason, that you speak in that tone?'

'No,' returned Denzil, collecting himself and stopping opposite to her. 'I feel that I have presumed to speak as I had no right to do; but if you knew'—he paused, and renewed his pacing to and fro—'if you knew how much I have felt for you and with you—how sincerely I have admired your spirit, your courage, your fortitude—you would forgive me if I am angered to think that the whim of that pretty petted cousin of yours should have drawn you into contact with her husband and forced upon your notice the difference of your respective lots. It was impossible to suppose you were not to be shaken by such close contact with—with a fellow who was all and all to you, yet I am fool enough to be disappointed at the result.'

'I hardly understand you,' exclaimed Laura, growing red and indignant; yet she *did* understand, even more than he intended. 'You have been so kind, so brotherly to me, that I feel you have a sort of right to say much; but I imagine you are somewhat unjust and very much mistaken. I have nothing to reproach myself with; I have simply tried to do my duty so far as I can see it. I am tired and worried, and—— But I cannot talk any longer; I must go away and be quiet in my own room. I do not want to quarrel with you, and I shall if I stay.'

She rose and went slowly to the door. Denzil sprang forward to open it for her.

'I do not know how I have come to forget myself, and speak in this way. You must forgive me, Laura—Miss Piers. I have been rude, presumptuous; but *I* too am disturbed. I made a discovery to-day that has startled me; I feel the effects still; it will influence my whole life perhaps—and—we are still friends then, although I have deserved your displeasure?'

'Oh yes; very good friends, if you wish. I hope your discovery is of nothing bad for yourself or your mother?'

'I hope not. One day we may exchange secrets,' he returned. And Laura gave him a sad little smile as she passed, and hurried to her room.

'Good-gracious!' cried Mrs. Crewe, when she reached home about half an hour afterwards. 'I had no idea you would be back so early. I just took the opportunity of going with Miss Brown to see Cooke and Maskelyne, and most extraordinary they are. But I never dreamed of your being here before me. I am quite distressed to hear that Laura was not well. You were quite right to take her away at once. I am convinced she has taken cold, and I shall make her some gruel, with a little moist sugar and just a tablespoonful of brandy.'

'Make it a glassful,' said Denzil, unfolding an evening paper. 'There is no sense in your spoonful.'

'Oh, that would be too much,' returned his mother, hurrying from the room. 'You do not suppose a young lady can take strong stuff like your sailors.'

CHAPTER II.

IT was a couple of days before Laura quite shook off the effect of her fainting-fit. In truth, her strength seemed scarcely equal to the load laid upon her, and at times the questions, 'What shall I do? how shall I guide myself?' became absolute torture, so perpetual were their recurrence. Yet, amid the gravity of such thoughts she found room for a smaller annoyance, which fretted and stung her. Denzil Crewe evidently thought she was still pining in hopeless love for Reginald Piers; and she saw no means to undeceive him. On such a subject she could offer no assertions, and if she could they would not be believed. Her depression, her preoccupation, her altered mien, might all be naturally accounted for by the theory of an unrequited passion, and for many a long day to come her lips must be sealed, if indeed she should ever speak to tell the strange discovery which had presented to her the bitter cup of mingled gall and vinegar, which she

could not choose but drink. It was strange, how this minor matter vexed her, and revealed how surely she had trusted in her friend's complete and sympathetic perception of her mind and character. That he should misunderstand her on such a subject seemed too hard. Meantime she determined to test the truth of the extraordinary statements contained in Holden's letter.

Her daily occupations secured her an unusual degree of independence; it was perfectly easy to arrange *not* to give a particular lesson, and the time it would have occupied was at her disposal unquestioned. By such an arrangement she was sure of some hours of freedom one day about a week after her return from Pierslynn, and turning her back on the scene of her daily labours, she started to seek the church named in the letter which had so changed her life.

It was a long, wearisome drive, in an omnibus filled to overflowing with a constantly fluctuating crowd of passengers, and Laura descended at the Mansion House, dusty, crushed, and with a sense of having been trampled underfoot; after a moment of bewilderment she collected herself and applied for direction to a stately policeman: 'St. Olave's, miss? let me see—it is in a rare out-of-the-way corner; you had best make your way into Cannon Street, turn towards St. Paul's Churchyard, and take the third street to the left after you pass the station. It is a narrow, crooked lane; after that, you had best ask your way again.'

Laura thanked him, and turned away with an odd sense of being ashamed of herself and her errand, and a strong wish that she had on a thicker veil.

She found her way easily enough to the opening of the narrow street indicated, following its winding for a little distance, and after some further directions from a porter who was lounging at the entry of a court, Laura made her way to a quiet nook bounded by dingy red brick houses on three sides, the fourth being occupied by a high iron railing which separated them from a space of green sward, shaded by a large lime-tree whose blackened, gnarled trunk gave little promise of the leafy crown which sheltered the enclosure. Beyond was a very old, smoke-dimmed, decrepit-looking church, and at the farther side of the little square was a small, two-storied house with a vivid green door, with a bright brass plate inscribed 'James Pratt, clerk.'

As Laura approached this door it opened, and a respectable-looking middle-aged man came forth, who asked her civilly what she wanted, listening to her reply with a slightly surprised expression.

'The entry of a marriage in 1819 or '20,' he repeated. 'Yes, certainly, you can look at the register. I am obliged to go out, but my wife will show you the books, and the fee is eighteenpence. You can pay it when you have examined the register. Here, Sarah!' a plump, rosy woman responded; 'I will give you the keys.'

He left the room, but soon returned with three or

four ponderous keys on a rusty ring, and, after murmuring an indistinct apology about pressing business, walked off.

The wife hastily took off her apron, put on a bonnet, and led the way through a wrought-iron gate, and then, unlocking the church-door with a clang, ushered Laura into the dark, damp old edifice. The earthy odour, the James I. monuments, and statues in the hideous Queen Anne style, the deserted, disused aspect of the interior, struck her with indescribable, chill melancholy.

'This way, miss,' said her guide, turning down a passage between the high pews, and conducting her into a dingy little vestry, where a limp surplice hung in a ghostly fashion against the wall.

'About what date, miss, do you want?' asked the clerk's wife, selecting a rusty key and opening an old oak press.

'I had better look at the register for 1820,' said Laura huskily, recalling her father's age, and the date of his death.

She trembled as she spoke. She was on the eve of testing the truth of the strange story which she strove to doubt, and yet which seemed to force belief upon her. *If* it proved true, what a task lay before her!

'Will you please look yourself, miss? I am not much of a scholar, and the back of this here book is rubbed terrible.'

Between them they selected the volume, and then Laura searched nervously back from the date

of her father's birth. Even at that distant epoch the quaint old church seemed to have been falling into disuse, as the marriages seemed few, considering the thickly inhabited district around it.

Laura turned over two or three pages, and finally, among the entries in July, 1820, she came to the following:

'25th. Geoffrey Piers, gentleman, bachelor, of Llanogwen, residing at No. 4, Church Row, and Valerie Lavelle, also of this parish.'

Laura sat looking at the faded writing, speechless, scarce able to collect her thoughts, while her companion moved the chairs, and made a semblance of re-arranging things, in order not to leave the visitor alone with the church registers.

'It *is* true, then,' was Laura's only distinct idea. 'And what next?'

'I suppose I may copy this?' she said at last, rousing herself with an effort.

'Yes, sure, miss. I think there is a pen and ink somewheres about.'

'Do not trouble yourself. I have a pencil and note-book;' and she hastily wrote down the entry.

'I thank you,' resumed Laura, when she had completed her task. 'I need trouble you no further, I suppose. I can inspect the register at any time, on payment of a fee?'

'Certainly, miss; only if you come about dinner-time you are more likely to catch my husband. He assists in keeping the books of a house in Cannon Street, and is often out. Really, the

church is so deserted, there are no fees nor nothing, in a manner of speaking, to make a living by; people must take care of themselves,' etc.

'No doubt,' returned Laura absently.

She strolled to the door and stood there a moment, comparing the sunshine without and the chill earthy dulness of the interior; trying to picture the group at the communion rails at the lonely, secret wedding of her grandfather and his Canadian wife; pitying the humiliation such a marriage must have been, even while the friendless girl must have been grateful for the tardy reparation. But why had her grandfather permitted the stigma of illegitimacy to rest on his son? What misery and injustice had arisen from this suppression of the truth! And what would be the end thereof?

'Good-day, miss,' said the clerk's wife, approaching to lock the doors. And Laura felt she must go forth to work out her destiny.

Slowly she retraced her steps to seek a westward omnibus, striving in vain to think clearly and with sequence.

Issuing from the sleepy nook into the eddying rush of the main stream, Laura found herself again at the Mansion House. She was profoundly occupied with the question, should she, or should she not, finish her work by calling in Gray's Inn Lane before she returned home? She dreaded the visit, partly because she shrank slightly from venturing on such an unknown land alone, but more because

she so much dreaded that the stranger in whose hands Holden had left his papers might cross-examine her, and extract from her any knowledge that could disgrace Reginald. How keenly, how bitterly she felt that he was irretrievably disgraced in her own eyes; yet, at all hazards, she must shield his reputation from those of others!

What would the Admiral say? His judgment, however, would be softened by his dominant belief in the wretchedness of human nature, unassisted by divine grace. But what would Mr. Trent say, with his strict ideas of honour and integrity, uninfluenced as they were by any theory of spiritual rectification?'

How should she guide herself so as to be just, yet not pitiless?

'Why, Miss Piers, what brings *you* into the City?' said a familiar voice; and Laura, startled out of her thoughts, looked up, with a sudden sense of detection, to encounter Mr. Trent's eyes fixed on her with a look of surprise. 'I am afraid you will not find much material for art, high or low, here.'

'I am not so sure,' returned Laura, rallying her forces and shaking hands with him. The materials of true art abound everywhere. 'How is Mrs. Trent?'

'Remarkably well, I think; she says she is utterly worn out with fatigue. You know the wedding comes off on Tuesday, and the whole household is upside down with preparations.'

'I can understand that. When it is all quite

over, I will come and hear about it from Mrs. Trent.'

'She is always glad to see you. Your cousin, Mrs. Piers, is coming up for the ceremony; very friendly of her. I have just parted with Reginald. I was nearly as much surprised to see him in the City as to meet you. What shall I tell Mrs. Trent? That you have a commission to paint the Lord Mayor and Corporation?'

'Such a subject deserves a Titian, if we had one,' returned Laura, smiling. 'No; say I was making a large investment—anything you like.'

'Very well; and good-morning. I am somewhat pressed for time.'

He hurried away, and Laura went on almost blindly for a minute or two, so stunned did she feel by the notion of her narrow escape of meeting Reginald. How could she have spoken to him? How could she have met his eye? Her difficulties seemed to spring up thick and fast. With a kind of desperate resolution she determined to go straight to Gray's Inn Lane and finish her task.

By the time she had found the number inscribed on Holden's letter she felt calmer, and soon discovered the name of 'Winter, accountant,' painted on the side of the doorway, with a large '2' indicating the second-floor.

On reaching it, she was admitted by a grubby clerk to a dingy office, and, on asking for Mr. Winter, was shown into an inner den, where sat an elderly, grizzled, red-eyed, not too neatly attired

man, who was writing at an office-table surrounded by a litter of papers.

'Miss Piers,' he said, looking at the card his clerk had given him. 'Ha! Miss Piers,' he repeated, as if trying to remember something. 'Sit down, if you please.' But Laura, who felt a quick aversion to the man and his surroundings, remained standing. 'Now then,' he went on, as the clerk left the room and closed the door, 'what can we do for you, ma'am?'

'I have come,' said Laura, restored by a wholesome feeling of antagonism and speaking with quiet firmness, 'to claim some papers which the late Mr. James Holden tells me, in this letter, he left in your care for me.' She opened the letter as she spoke, and took out the one enclosed and directed to 'Mr. G. Winter.'

'Oh! ay; that's it. I remember now,' he returned, looking sharply at her while he drew his left finger and thumb slowly down his cheek-bones till they met at his chin, while he perused the letter. 'Yes, I heard our poor friend was no more, a few days ago; an old pal—I mean companion—of his was here last week, to know if there were any assets, for he owed him, he said, fifty odd; but I knew that couldn't be, for Holden paid up everything before he started for Sydney. I managed the whole thing for him. It was then he left the parcel you are in search of. Pray,' rising, and placing himself on a threadbare hearthrug before a rusty grate, 'how am I to know you are Miss Laura Piers?'

'I am sure I cannot tell,' returned Laura. 'If the possession of this letter, and that which I have just given you, is not sufficient proof of my identity, I have no other.'

'Hum,' looking very earnestly at her. 'What sort of a man was Holden?'

'I never saw him but once. I think he had black eyes and hair. He was rather stout, and looked as if he rode races, or went to races.'

'That's him. Where was he employed?'

'At Messrs. Thurston and Trent's.'

'Good! Do you know what the papers are?'

'Scarcely. They concern myself, I believe; and possibly may not be of much value.'

'Likely enough! And I dare say there is no use in making much ado about nothing; as you have brought me the man's own letter authorizing me to give them to you, the bearer, I suppose I may as well give them up. You will, I presume, pay the usual fee on delivery?'

'How much is it?' asked Laura, doubting that she had sufficient money with her, and feeling inclined to forfeit everything rather than return to the office of Mr. George Winter.

'One guinea,' he returned, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers-pockets.

'I will pay it,' said Laura shortly.

'And give me a receipt?'

'Certainly.'

'Sit down, then, while I look in the safe,' he returned. Taking a key from a drawer in his table,

he proceeded to open and examine several bundles of papers in an iron safe which stood in one corner, keeping up a running fire of comment while he did so. 'Poor Holden! He was a pleasant fellow, but a trifle too fast. It's more than two years since he left that packet—(where the dickens has it got to?)—in my keeping. "Don't give it to nobody," says he, "that hasn't a written order from me; for I know you are true blue!" Ay! I helped him out of more scrapes than one; and, between you and me, he was on the verge of "all up" when he got the pot of money that put things square. But he was uncommon close; never could find out how he came by it! It was just a month or two before he left England. Paid everything in brand-new Bank of England notes and gold; no tracing anything. Ay, here it is at last. There you are, ma'am,' beating the dust off against the chimneypiece, then laying the parcel, which was wrapped in brown paper, beside his blotting-book; and locking the safe, he took up his pen to write out a form of acquittance for Laura to sign.

While she sat still and silent in the chair she had at last accepted, feeling as if in a dream, and looking with a sort of dread at the commonplace parcel which contained the key to the mystery so unexpectedly revealed—she longed, yet half feared, to examine its contents, yet she almost trembled with eagerness to have it safe in her own possession. If this uncouth, repulsive man had any idea of its contents, what a scourge he would be to Reginald!

Into what depths of degradation might he not drag him!

'Now then, put your name there, ma'am; hand over one-one, and the papers are yours. I hope you will find them worth the money,' with a slight smile.

'I hope so,' returned Laura carelessly, as she rose, and, advancing to the table, read over the receipt he had written, and signed her name to it; finally she laid the desired one-pound-one upon the table.

'All right,' said Mr. Winter, scrutinizing the coin severely. 'I am happy to hand you over this parcel, and should the relatives, heirs, executors, or assigns make any opposition or inquiry, you will bear me harmless.'

'I feel sure no one has any interest in the documents, whatever they may be, save myself.'

'Very well; wish you a good-morning.'

'Thank you,' said Laura, bowing as she moved towards the door.

'And,' continued Mr. Winter, who seemed loth to let her go, 'my clerk's fee is half-a-crown!'

'Indeed,' replied Laura, continuing her retreat before he could interpose between her and the exit, but without again opening her purse till the pale and grimy lad in the first room opened the outer door and stood with it in his hand, when in passing she bestowed the stipulated half-crown on him, saying, 'Mr. Winter tells me that is your fee.'

The astonishment depicted in his face enlightened

Laura a good deal as to the legality of the fees demanded.

She was thankful, however, to be out of the house and in possession of the papers, whatever they might be, at any cost.

Though the interview had seemed long, it had not really occupied much time, and it was barely half-past three when she escaped into the open air and the busy obscurity of the streets. She felt strangely nervous, ready to start at her own shadow. What if she met Reginald bound upon the same errand as herself? for perhaps he knew of Holden's death, and the existence of these letters. She must command herself, and strive with her unassisted judgment to decide on the most prudent and least vindictive plan of proceeding.

Meantime, she feared to be alone. She knew how little chance there was at that hour of the day to find a seat in a Holborn omnibus, so she ventured on the extravagance of a cab, and thus managed to reach her own quarter of the town in time to give one of the private lessons which properly belonged to that day.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. CREWE had made a considerable change in her domestic arrangements since her son had taken up his abode with her. She had adopted the six o'clock dinner, instead of the indiscriminate meal with tea and bread-and-butter, over which she used to preside at that hour.

'It is a cheap piece of gentility,' she observed, in one of her many confidential conversations with her excellent neighbour, Miss Brown. 'Call it dinner or tea, people are as hungry for one as the other. I wanted late dinner from the first—I mean since the Admiral came—but he would not hear of it. I dare say he thought I saved a fortune by calling luncheon "dinner," and dinner "tea;" but I am sure he did not like it. How could he, accustomed as he has always been to the elegancies of aristocratic society?—only he is such a Christian, that he is never so happy as when he is thoroughly uncomfortable in a good cause.'

'That may be Christianity, but it is not common-sense,' said Miss Brown, with a snap.

Mrs. Crewe slid dexterously out of the discussion by remarking that the Admiral had attained to spiritual heights beyond *their* reach, and then brought round the congenial topic of Collins's shortcomings.

On this particular day Laura was delighted to find herself in excellent time for the evening meal and passed to her own room unquestioned and unsuspected, her precious packet concealed in a large roll of drawing-paper.

'That's right, dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, opening the dining-room door. 'I was just beginning to hope you would not be late; it has been *so* warm, and you look that tired and dusty and worn out, it gives me a pain in the back to look at you.'

'Then I will hide myself as soon as I can,' returned Laura, running upstairs.

Her first care was to put away the parcel in her safest box, which had a patent lock. Then she sat down to rest and breathe, while memory raised the curtain of the past.

Scarce two years ago she had sat and thought in that very room, almost dazed by the sudden flood of love and light and intolerable joy that had broken in upon her. Was it possible that she had really had a lover, and such a lover—charming, handsome, distinguished? Alas! was it all a gigantic sham? Yet in the old times, when neither had a thought of the future or its possibilities, she

had been Reginald's chosen friend and confidante! There was a certain amount of sympathy and mutual comprehension between them which nothing could quite uproot. And yet, if this strange story, the truth of which she could no longer doubt, was true, how basely he had robbed her! How she had been beaten to the earth by the storm of disappointment and mortification! What a martyrdom she had endured since those days of dazzling delight; and she was there still, living, breathing; her own self, not crushed out of mental form and intelligence, but calm, resigned; and, as she acknowledged to herself with surprise, not incapable of enjoyment in some directions, but that she was at present somewhat overweighted with the task that lay before her. For she could not, must not, allow Reginald to go altogether unpunished.

Yet how could she strike him without hurting dear, innocent, unsuspecting Winnie? She could not answer the question. She must first acquaint herself with the contents of Holden's packet—and then? She found no convenient conclusion, so proceeded to make a more than usually careful toilette, in order to avert attention from her worn, weary aspect; nor did she leave the grateful shelter of her chamber till informed that 'dinner was on the table.'

Both the Admiral and Denzil were waiting when she entered the drawing-room, and she apologized in some confusion for her unusual want of punctuality. Laura was always anxious to show her

regard for those with whom she lived, by her quiet observance of the small politenesses that are to society what mortar is to bricks, without which the wall could not stand.

When dinner was over, the *partie carrée* assembled in the drawing-room, and Laura observed that the Admiral seemed unusually disposed to talk. He had met an old shipmate that day who had been 'interviewing' one of the Lords of the Admiralty on behalf of his son, a young lieutenant, and this opened up a long vista of bygone days. The Admiral was deeply interested in his old friend's son, and announced his intention of speaking to certain influential personages in his favour.

Mrs. Crewe listened with much attention and approval, and did not fail to observe with a sigh that she wished his interest could be employed in favour of her dear boy.

The 'dear boy,' meantime, lay back easily in his chair, apparently lost in thought, and Laura, though resolutely keeping her mind present with her, was glad to be silent, and occupied with some ornamental work destined for Mrs. Crewe.

Presently their neighbour, Mr. Brown, joined them with a *Times* in his hand, to talk over an important City article with Denzil. But Denzil was not disposed to talk, so Mr. Brown, nothing loth, turned to the Admiral, and they were soon deep in an argument on the amount of benefit really derived by society from what is usually termed progress.

'Play us something, Laura dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, who did not care for conversation of this description.

Laura silently went to the piano, and began to play from memory the old airs and dreamy cradle-songs that she knew her listeners liked. While she did so she remembered that she had scarcely exchanged a word with Denzil since the evening when he had spoken to her so harshly. The absorbing interest of her search for the documents indicated by Holden had thrust it back among the stores of memory, but not obliterated it. She wondered why he had been so cross that night, and earnestly hoped no evil had happened to ruffle the rare interval of peace his mother was enjoying, or indeed to wound himself. She hoped he did not think she had avoided him because she was offended; she had been a little hurt at his tone, but even that had passed away; she would not easily let so good and pleasant a friend go; so she thought within herself while she touched softly, tenderly, the pathetic notes of 'Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon.'

'We have been quite strangers for the last week,' said Denzil's voice suddenly, close behind her. 'I know you are above small spite of all kinds, yet whether you intended it or not, I have felt it punishment.'

'That is your own fancy,' she returned, 'certainly not my intention. We are both too busy for imaginary wrongs.'

'And too true, I hope,' he added.

There was a pause, and Laura's fingers strayed over the keys and brought out, almost unconsciously, 'Logie o' Buchan.'

Denzil came a step forward and leant against the end of the piano.

'I found a book to-day I have heard you express a wish to read, so I have brought it to you.'

'Indeed! What is it?'

'Freytag's last volume.'

'Is it for a peace-offering? that was not needed,' said Laura, looking up with one of her brief sweet smiles. 'Yet I thank you heartily, and accept it greedily.'

'That's right,' returned Denzil, looking well pleased. 'I wish I could read German.'

'It is not so difficult; I think I could teach you.'

'Do not tempt me,' he returned, his deep dark eyes lighting up with a kindly glance. 'For me, it would be waste of time. Lives like mine are too full of indispensable work to allow of excursions into pleasant by-ways. I must stick to the main road if I mean to accomplish what I want.'

'And what do you want?' ceasing to play, and looking up at him with interest.

'Independence and a fair position.'

'Yes, and you will win it. Men have the game in their hands. But what uphill work it is for a woman to make a place in this crowded world!'

'I dare say it is; but women have men to work for them.'

'Sometimes. The time is going by for that. Do not suppose I am too self-asserting, but when you think of the hundreds of women who cannot possibly find men to work for them, you must admit we have a right to help ourselves if we can; we are becoming too heavy a burden for you.'

'Perhaps so; the mere fact of increasing population creates great changes.'

'Work is no hardship,' said Laura; 'it is often the highest pleasure.'

'Your work, yes,' he returned. 'But think of sewing long seams and things, the livelong day.'

'True; the lot of some is very hard. Where is my book?'

'Here,' said Denzil, turning to a side-table and taking up a parcel that lay there; he opened it, and produced a foreign-looking volume with a neutral-tinted paper cover.

'You are really very good and kind to me.'

'Then you give me plenary absolution?'

'You do not need it; if you did, this book would purchase much.'

'I do not like that way of putting it,' exclaimed Denzil, his dark cheek growing red. 'I do not want to buy a pardon, though I am very glad to receive it a free gift.'

'Well, needed or not, you have it.'

'Thank you.'

There was a pause; Laura resumed her playing, and Denzil stood still by the piano, leaning on the end and looking down into the face of the musician.

'I had a visit from your young cousin, Herbert Fielden, at the office this morning,' resumed Denzil. 'He was on his way to Pierslynn, and had some business in the City. I like the youngster—there is something kindly and frank about him, and he has a look of his beautiful sister; all the better for him. He hankers still after the sea; but I fancy Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn would scarcely care to have a merchant skipper for a brother.'

'I cannot tell—there is no pretension about Winnie; she is very true and real.'

'Yes; but remember she has another self to influence her now, and one more alive to appearances than she is.'

Laura made no answer.

'Herbert tells me his sister is coming to town for Miss Trent's wedding. It is to take place immediately, is it not?'

'Next week, I believe. I have not heard from Winnie for some days. I suppose she waits to tell me which day they arrive. I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing her so soon again.'

'It is a great pleasure, I suppose,' said Denzil, looking at her keenly. 'Unbelievers do say there is no such thing as female friendship, but I think Mrs. Piers and you are very fast friends.'

'I think we are, and so long as I am sure of my own friendships, I do not care to generalize on the subject.'

There was another pause, and then Denzil said somewhat abruptly:

'Have you been working at South Kensington since you returned?'

'Not yet; to-morrow is a students' day, and I think of copying there in the afternoon; there are some bits of Danby's I should like to get hold of.'

'If I can leave the City in tolerable time, I will come and see what you are doing—that is, if I may.'

'Of course; I shall be glad to know what you think of my work; you have a very good eye for colour, considering.'

'That is encouraging! You are feeling all right again, Miss Piers? quite recovered that attack?'

'Yes, quite.'

'Yet you are not looking yourself.'

'I should be very pleased to be some one else, could I choose. Yet no! it would be base and cowardly to shrink from one's own personality.'

'Laura!' said the Admiral suddenly, 'may I trouble you to bring me a small parcel of papers tied with black ribbon which lies beside my desk? These reports, my dear sir, will show you the difficulties our association has had to contend with,' etc., etc.

And Laura's *tête-à-tête* with Denzil was over.

* * * * *

When she escaped to her own room it was nearly ten o'clock, and having locked her door and shaded the light, she drew forth the packet she had purchased that day, determined to master its contents before she slept. But first she put away the book

Denzil had brought her, with a pleased sense of kindly recognition and satisfaction that the little estrangement between them had been swept away. 'He is very kind and thoughtful, and a true gentleman;' the half-uttered words came with a sigh, as she felt that no temptation, no sophistry, would have induced *him* to play the traitor.

Then she broke the seal of the packet, which was inscribed:

'To be delivered only to the person named by me.
'J. HOLDEN.'

Within was a memorandum signed with the same name.

'These letters were addressed to my father's aunt, Mrs. Deborah Pryce; she resided for many years near the little town of Llanogwen, in North Wales; my father inherited what property she left, and among other things these papers. They lay for years, unnoticed, in an old desk, until about four years ago, when, on my mother's death, in looking through her few effects, I came upon them, and thinking they might possibly be of use to myself or some one else, put them aside. Mrs. Pryce was for many years a widow, and had a farm which she managed herself. She had always let some rooms in her house to sportsmen, as there was good fishing and shooting all round, and this Geoffrey Piers and his wife appear to have been her tenants from 1819 till the spring of 1821. One

letter is missing; it was a very short one, containing the mere announcement that the marriage had taken place. I gave it to Reginald Piers when we came to an understanding respecting the Pierslynn succession. In this matter I have acted for the best for all parties, feeling satisfied that if I gain a little, no one will be the loser, unless, indeed, certain arrangements are not carried out, in which case I reserve to myself the means of doing justice.'

Having read this carefully, Laura took up a letter marked '2,' and seeing the remaining documents were marked '3' and '4,' proceeded to unfold it. The paper, yellow with age, was covered on three sides with small, fine, faded writing, while the fourth bore the inscription, 'To Mrs. Pryce, Craigedon Farm, Llanogwen, Merionethshire,' the London post-mark, and was dated 'July 28th, 1820.' The address inside was 'Church Row,' and the date, written in old-fashioned style, 'This 28th of July, 1820.'

The letter began, 'Dear and respected friend,' and proceeded to say that they (her husband and herself) had changed their plans, and instead of returning, as her former letter stated, on the following Wednesday, would remain a week longer in town, as her dear husband (the new title was repeated as often as possible) wished she should see some of the sights in the great metropolis, especially as she felt so much stronger and better than when she left Llanogwen.

'The feeling that I can stand by my husband's side in the face of the world seems to give me new life,' she continued. 'And it need never harm him, for I do not want to intrude upon his proud people, only to be his true wife and helper, in peace and obscurity, in your pretty, pleasant home. How can I ever thank you enough, dear Mrs. Pryce, for all your goodness! I know it was your excellent advice decided Geoffrey to follow the inclination of his own kind heart. You are a mother to me, the only mother I ever knew! Mine has been such a lonely life. I so wished you had been with me at church; I had no one but the clerk and the woman of the house where we lodge. Though I was so happy, I could not keep back my tears, and when I repeated after the pastor, "Till death us do part," I felt a sudden chill, as though the parting was not far off. You will scold me for this, dear friend! but now I feel quite gay and hopeful. I shall remember your advice, and take great care of my marriage certificate till I can give it to you to keep. I am writing while my husband is gone out on business, and it is the next best thing to talking with you. How much I shall have to tell you when we meet!'

Then followed some mention of the Tower and St. Paul's; of a beautiful dress her husband had given her; and then it ended with the words:

'Always yours attached

'VALERIE PIERS.'

The tears rose to Laura's eyes as they perused these lines; she wondered that a French Canadian, as her grandmother seemed to have been, could write such good English. She had evidently received some cultivation, and her letter had a certain refinement that made it hard to imagine how she could have formed such a connection as that which at first existed between her and Geoffrey Piers. But conjectures were fruitless. She folded up the letter and took up a small slip of paper, which certified—

'That it appears by the Register of Marriages, kept for the Parish of St. Olaves [City], in the borough of ——, that Geoffrey Piers and Valerie Lavelle were married, the twenty-fifth day of July, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty.

'Witness my hand this twenty-fifth day of July, 1820.

'T. LAWRENCE, Vicar.'

One more letter, dated October, 1820, from Chester, described the writer as not much the better for the change, and very anxious to return to Llanogwen, as Mr. Piers would be obliged to go to his cousin's place at Pierslynn. Mrs. Piers was always very fond of him, and she was ill, etc.; and the writer adds: 'I could not bear Geoffrey's absence, unless I were with you. He is so kind and gentle; how shall I ever leave him?'

Finally, in a rude round hand on a piece of ruled paper, that looked as if it had been torn out of an account-book, was written as follows:

'This letter, October 27th, was the last she wrote me, poor dear. She never left me again till she went to a better world, the 9th of January following, just a fortnight after her little baby boy was born. I had him christened Edward, in our parish church, as I knew his father was a prelatist; but he was too distraught, poor gentleman, with grief, to know or care what I did.

'I loved that boy, and had the sole care of him for five years. Mr. Piers paid me regularly, and came often to see him. At last he took him away somewhere that he might be properly educated; so I lost my little darling.

'I had a few letters from Mr. Piers telling me how the boy got on; but now it is nigh six years since I had any tidings, and I do not expect ever to see or hear anything more of Mr. Piers or his dear boy; but so long as I live I will keep these papers, and I charge my nephew, Charles James Holden, to do the same, as there is no knowing when they may be of use to the boy.

'DEBORAH PRYCE.

'*Sept. 14th*, 1831.'

This was all. Laura sat long in deep though confused thought. What the legal value of these letters might be she could not tell; to her they

were proof positive. Indeed, she could not conceive a doubt existing as to her right to the family estate.

Still the wearisome question arose again and again, what should she do?

To attack Reginald, although he had wronged and robbed her, was almost beyond her strength; to submit to such a wrong with her eyes open was not to be thought of. At last a resolution slowly formed itself in her mind; she would wait awhile, and then she would speak to him alone. Having shown her full knowledge of his treachery, she would come to some terms with him by which he should be neither beggared nor disgraced. This was all she could decide, and so, after a long, unprofitable reverie, she folded up the packet again, tied it carefully, locked it away, and went to bed, where, to her own surprise, she slept profoundly, having been much exhausted by the fatigue and excitement of the day.

* * * * *

The waking next morning, the going about her usual work, the interest and vexations of teaching, the writing a receipt for some small payment, all seemed strange and difficult to her.

She was unworldly enough, and very little inclined to cynicism or morbidness of any description, yet she could not help smiling as she thought of her social experience. She had learned so deeply the lesson of her own insignificance; not that she was annoyed by it: the few she loved,

loved her; but to the world—the general world—she knew she was just a praiseworthy 'young person,' who maintained herself, and could draw a little. Even of those who cared most for her, which of them recognised the power, the capability, that was in her? Suppose she stood revealed before them as the mistress of a fine estate, patroness of a couple of livings, the possessor of the power money always gives: with what sympathetic respect she would be spoken to, with what consideration she would be treated. Even Mrs. Crewe would think of her with awe tempered by love.

She smiled, quite kindly, at the idea; after all, of those she knew, the one who seemed to know her best was Denzil Crewe. He said little on the subject, but the habit he had of listening to her opinions, the very way in which he opposed them, proved a degree of appreciation she had never met from anyone else, not even Winnie, not even Reginald, when he was playing the lover—'a part,' thought Laura, with a sigh and a smile, 'no one will ever play to me again, unless, indeed, for the same reason—my title to Pierslynn.'

Yet she went through all her daily duties with more inward calm than she had felt for some time. Her doubts were all resolved; she held her fortune in her hand, and at her own disposal. The pain of this knowledge was always aching at the bottom of her heart; the terrible weariness of spirit that comes of disenchantment. But constant occupation gave relief, and the friendly companionship of

Denzil Crewe brightened her rare moments of leisure.

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The second day after Laura's excursion into the City, she was a little late for dinner, and ran up to her room to make a hasty toilet without first seeing Mrs. Crewe.

'Come away, my dear,' cried that lady, as she entered the dining-room, where the rest were at table. 'I am so sorry you were late to-day, of all days. It is the first time I have ventured to treat you to salmon, and yours will be quite cold,' performing a fantasia on the handbell. 'Collins, bring —oh, you have it! Sit down, Laura, and eat your fish, while I tell you the news. A little more salmon, Admiral?—just a thought? No. Well, Denzil, I insist on your taking *that, and* eating it,' dropping an abundant spoonful on his plate. 'Now then, Laura, who do you think paid me a visit to-day?'

'I am sure I cannot guess, Mrs. Crewe.'

'What do you say to Winnie! Mrs. Piers, of Pierslynn, herself, *and* the baby. She came, she said, without writing a line, just to surprise us. Collins, if you don't mind you will drop the knives and sauce-ladle, and grease all the carpet. And a great surprise it was. She looked sweet, in *such* a bonnet and cloak and dress! Madame Elise, my dear; no mistaking her style. She is just the same dear, warm-hearted, charming creature as ever. Is she not, Admiral?'

'Very interesting and worthy of affection indeed,' he returned, 'though she has caused me much grief.'

'When did they come to town?' cried Laura, all attention.

'Only yesterday; was it not kind and friendly of her to come out here so soon? The baby is a beautiful little darling, but delicate; it requires food, I am sure. Doctors may say what they like, but as I told that dear inexperienced young creature (and I think I *ought* to know), some babies *must* be fed, pearl barley boiled to a jelly, with a tinge of white sugar, and cooled to a proper degree with the purest milk you can get, is admirable after two months old; I have known splendid children reared upon it. Collins!' with withering severity, 'I will trouble you to look at the bottom of that plate, Collins; one would think you had stood it in the coal-cellar!'

'Did *you* look at the baby, dear Admiral?' asked Laura, with a smile.

'Yes, I *looked* at it; but these poor little creatures are beyond my comprehension,' he returned.

'Its limbs are not at all what they ought to be,' resumed Mrs. Crewe authoritatively. 'But what eyes the precious dear has! The exact model of its mother's. Do you know, my sweet Topsy was quite jealous to see the baby in my arms. She jumped on the small round table, and sat there straight up, with her pretty toes together, giving a

little croak now and then in a most intelligent manner. Denzil, would you cut a slice of cold beef for Topsy? I heard her mewing in the garden. She is annoyed with an ugly white cat that *will* come into our premises.'

'How long did Winnie say she was going to stay in town?'

'She did not say, but I fancy they will be here some weeks. She seemed so bright and happy, and said how she enjoyed your visit, Laura. She got well from the time you arrived.'

'I have no doubt yours is a healing influence,' said Denzil, smiling; 'though you and Mrs. Piers are so unlike in nature, I do not quite understand your being such great friends.'

'That is just it,' said Laura. 'Our angles fit into each other; were they a shade nearer they might graze.'

'The baby had a beautiful robe and pelisse,' resumed Mrs. Crewe, 'all white satin and lace; but he has no cap. I must say I like a baby in a cap. I stuck to them as long as I could, but even in my day they were going out. I remember what a sweet little angel Denzil looked in his close-quilled cap-border with its loops of white ribbon.'

Both Laura and Denzil burst into hearty laughter at the picture thus conjured up.

'Mrs. Piers wrote a little note for you, Laura; it is in the drawing-room.'

An announcement which made the rest of dinner seem very long, especially as the Admiral was

disposed to talk, and Mrs. Crewe did not like to move.

'Well, dear, what does she say?' asked Mrs. Crewe, when they had escaped the dining-room, the Admiral having ascended to his own chamber, and Denzil producing an evening paper, while Laura read her note.

'She begs me to go to her early to-morrow and spend the day, which she supposes I can do, as it is Sunday.'

'Will you go?' asked Denzil quickly.

'Oh yes, of course! Then I can tell her of my engagements, and she will see that I cannot be with her every day.'

'I dare say her own engagements will be so numerous that she may not want to see you every day,' he returned.

'Very likely,' said Laura calmly; 'our paths lie wide apart. Still, it is very pleasant to catch a glimpse of each other now and then.'

Denzil made no answer, and Mrs. Crewe took up her parable.

'No doubt it is, Laura dear; and very right and natural. I am sure it is highly to your credit having kept up your friendship with young Mrs. Piers so steadily. She may be a valuable friend to you yet.'

'She is always valuable to me,' said Laura, in a low tone.

'I wonder if Mr. Reginald Piers will ever honour me by calling again? I used to be all and all with

him, but I dare say he would feel awkward now. I must say my opinion of that young man is considerably changed, and he must know it.'

'All that is past and gone,' said Laura very gravely and composedly. 'I dare say he has nearly forgotten the terrible mistake he had almost made. Let us forget it too.'

'It would certainly be in better taste to do so,' said Denzil emphatically.

'Please, miss,' said Collins, opening the door suddenly, 'the Admiral says would you mind stepping upstairs a minute?'

CHAPTER IV.

'I SHALL be all alone to-day,' said Mrs. Crewe, as she and Laura returned to the dining-room the following morning, after attending the Admiral to the door as usual. He was in the habit of starting early on Sundays, in order to reach 'Mount Moriah' in good time, and Laura did not feel herself bound to accompany him invariably. 'Denzil started quite an hour ago, to catch the 9.30 train to Isleworth. He is invited to spend the day with Mr. Gibbon, the senior partner, who has a lovely place in the country. Very flattering, I am sure.' Then, after a pause, she resumed confidentially, 'Mr. Gibbons has a very nice daughter, I am told, highly accomplished, and very pretty. Now, it has struck me that all the attention Denzil has received from the family of late may possibly mean that he would not be unacceptable as a son-in-law.'

'Perhaps so,' said Laura, stirring a supplementary cup of tea.

'My son may not be a wealthy man,' continued Mrs. Crewe, with dignity, 'but he has birth, and high character, good looks, and, though I say it, first-rate abilities; it is my impartial opinion that the girl who gets my Denzil may bless her stars.'

'I am sure he would be the best possible husband,' returned Laura cordially. 'And now I must go too, as Winnie wants me to be with her early. But I will come back in time for tea, Mrs. Crewe, and go to church with you in the evening.'

It was with a curious mixture of pain and pleasure that Laura hastened to her appointment next day. Mr. and Mrs. Piers had established themselves at the A—— Hotel, being somewhat nearer the dowager's dwelling, as she professed the most devoted attachment to her little grandson.

Laura found Winnie in a pleasant room, opening on a balcony filled with flowers, she herself in most becoming summer attire, and 'baby' in his highly ornamented bassinette.

Winnie was writing when Laura entered, and sprang up to meet her with her usual affectionate warmth.

'I am so delighted to see you, dear! I was sure you would come early. I want so much to have a nice talk with you before Reginald comes back; he said he would come in to luncheon. How have you been, Laura? You do not look as well as you did at Pierslynn.'

'I dare say not. London is so warm and exhausting; but I am quite well. Now let me look at baby.'

After half an hour or more spent in admiring and discussing the sleeping infant, and expatiating on his surprising progress, Winnie exclaimed:

'I have a note for you from Mrs. Piers. She wants you to dine with her on Wednesday. You must come with me, dear. She is very nice in her own house, and you will like her.' And Laura, after some hesitation, agreed.

While they still spoke the door was thrown open, and a waiter announced 'Colonel Bligh.'

A tall, soldierly-looking man entered, and advanced to shake hands with Winnie. He was very sunburnt, with thick dark moustaches, abundant black hair, just touched with grey, and keen red-brown eyes.

'Hadn't the least idea you were in town till Piers looked me up this morning. Very glad to see you so blooming.'

He shook hands with Winnie as he spoke, and darted one quick inquiring glance at Laura.

He was followed in another moment by Reginald, who was, Laura at once noticed, looking brighter and better than when she last saw him. He was evidently much surprised at finding her with his wife, but assumed an air of great cordiality.

'Ah, Laura! delighted to see you! I was going to try if I should have better luck to-day than

Winifrid had yesterday, for I know you stay at home of a Sunday. And how have you been since you deserted Pierslynn?'

The blood went back to Laura's heart with a suffocating sensation as he spoke. His voice had all its old charm for her ear. Was it possible that this handsome, debonair gentleman, with his cordial, winning grace of manner, was a cheat, an impostor? Surely he was belied. He did not know her (Laura's) rights. He could not have played so base a part. She grew deadly pale, and it was a moment before she could control herself enough to reply.

'I am sure you were better at Pierslynn,' continued Reginald, looking at her earnestly. 'I cannot say London agrees with you.'

'Nor can I either!' exclaimed Winnie. 'Let me present Colonel Bligh to you, Laura. Miss Piers—Colonel Bligh.'

The Colonel made a profound bow; both gentlemen sat down, and luncheon proceeded. Colonel Bligh and Mrs. Piers kept up a running fire of conversation, in which Reginald joined occasionally, but in spite of herself Laura was absolutely silent.

'Come, Laura, you have no wine. You must take a glass with me,' cried Reginald at last. 'Hock to Miss Piers. I know you like the Rhine wines. What have you been doing since you came back to town? Has the Admiral been taking you to too many prayer-meetings? or have you been working too hard? Ah, Laura!' lowering his

voice, while Winnie and Colonel Bligh were laughing over some mutual acquaintances, 'you are not made for this dull, hard life. You must cut London and come to us. Why, Winnie will scarce ever feel any place home without you!'

Laura raised her eyes and looked straight at him for the first time since he came into the room.

'Thank you,' she said, slowly and coldly; 'you are very good.'

Something in her tone, in her eyes, suddenly stilled Reginald's warm hospitality. He looked away, a quick uneasy frown contracted his brow for an instant, and he turned from Laura to join abruptly in the conversation of the others, but soon again addressed her.

'And what does the Admiral do with himself?'

'He is always busy. He has joined a sect of benevolent people, and has quantities of business to do, examining into cases and visiting districts.'

'Happy are the rogues and vagabonds whose cases are inquired into by our good old friend!' exclaimed Reginald, laughing, and pouring out a large glassful of sherry. 'I imagine it requires no great skill to throw dust in his eyes.'

'I am not so sure,' said Laura. 'I imagine he often sees more and deeper than we think, only his goodness is of the order that shines equally on the evil and the good.'

'That is exceedingly immoral,' said Colonel Bligh gravely.

'It must be horribly difficult to find out who is deserving and who is not,' observed Winnie; 'and while one is trying to find out, some good creatures may die of starvation! Some more strawberries, Laura?'

'I say, Piers, you must take Mrs. Piers down to Goodwood. The races come off on Friday next. Let us make up a party. There is Mrs. Compton, a capital little woman, a sort of relation of mine (she is going to call upon you, Mrs. Piers, if you will allow her), she would like to come, and some of her following. By-the-bye, our old friend Madame Moscynska is staying with her; they are an uncommonly jolly pair of widows, only Mrs. Compton is far and away the best of the two.'

At the mention of this name Winnie's big eyes lit up with a startled, angry look—at least, so it seemed to Laura, who understood every change in her countenance. She did not reply immediately, and Reginald said quickly:

'By all means. Mrs. Piers has lost both Epsom and Ascot. She ought to see Goodwood—eh, Winnie?'

'I thought Madame Moscynska had gone abroad?' she said slowly, pushing her plate away and leaning back in her chair.

'She *said* she was going, at any rate,' returned Reginald easily. 'But we know "how light a cause may move" that fair lady to change her plans.'

'As to the lightness of the cause, it is impossible to say,' remarked Colonel Bligh, helping himself to

mayonaise. 'She likes to be suspected of being a political agent—a sort of pale phantom of the celebrated Princess Lieven, minus a great many important ingredients. She is deuced clever, for all that, and one of the most eloquent listeners I ever met.'

'What a curious phrase, Colonel Bligh!' exclaimed Winnie.

'I mean, she has a way of appearing so absorbed in what you are saying to her (if you are at all worth the trouble), that a man begins to think himself no end of a *raconteur*, or conversationalist, and that she must be a very highly gifted woman to have found it out.'

'Exactly,' said Winnie quietly, though her colour rose, and Laura could see a tell-tale pulse quivering in her snowy throat just above her rich lace cravatte; 'quite clever enough to make unpleasant use of the admissions or revelations her eloquent listening may have led you on to make.'

'Come, Mrs. Piers! that is too severe. Angelic women like you ought to leave sarcasm to poor commonplace, worldly mortals.'

'By Jove! it is too bad,' cried Reginald, with rather a forced laugh. 'You must know that when we first met Princess Moscynska in Paris, Mrs. Piers being quite inexperienced in all matters appertaining to the higher regions and mysteries of the toilette, Madame took her in hand. I must say she had an apt pupil. My wife soon found she could go alone, considerably before Madame Mos-

cynska recognised the fact, and hence the blood-feud which exists between them; more on our side, I confess, than on the arch-offender's.'

'I am not surprised at the "Moscynska" being distanced,' said Colonel Bligh, with a bow and look of unmistakable admiration; 'she is much too heavily weighted for competition with such an opponent.'

'Well—well—you will see about Goodwood,' cried Reginald impatiently.

Winnie opened her lips as if about to speak, and then closed them resolutely.

'Yes, I am going to dine with Mrs. Compton to-day, and will let you know what is to be done.'

Winnie did not speak, and Laura felt a new light—a very unpleasant light—dawning upon her.

'I suppose your sister, Lady Jervois, will be in town to-morrow or next day,' said Winnie to her husband.

'I am afraid not; I forgot to mention that my mother (I was sitting with her this morning) had a letter from Helen, and Jervois has caught a chill. He was chopping wood or digging potatoes, or some such amusement, and got overheated, so there is no chance of Helen coming up till her lord and master is all right.'

'I am so sorry,' cried Winnie; 'not so much for Sir Gilbert, I confess, but I do like Helen. Do you know Lady Jervois, Colonel Bligh?'

'No, I have never met her; but I have heard Markham—you know Markham of the—th Dragoon

Guards—talk of her. He says she was a perfect pocket Venus, when she first came out.'

'Poor Nelly! how changed she is! yes, Markham was awfully spoony on Helen. But he had no money, so he wisely sheered off.'

'He has come into something since, has he not?' asked Colonel Bligh. 'He was very jolly with us on board the yacht; and, by the way, what a capital comrade the Princess was! We missed her awfully when she left; she kept everything ship-shape, and old Dereham could do nothing without her. What an old muff he is! she tells me she is going down to keep house for him in August; if so, I think I will accept shooting-quarters there.'

'You had better come to Pierslynn,' said Reginald; 'I think I can offer you good sport.'

Somewhat to Laura's surprise, this invitation met with no seconding from Winnie, who seemed in deep thought, and soon after said:

'Laura, shall we go into the next room? will you come with me to Mrs. Piers? I should like to hear about Sir Gilbert, and I will set you down in Leamington Road afterwards.'

'Thank you,' said Laura.

'What are you going to do, Reginald?'

'Who? me? Oh! I am not sure. Bligh and myself thought of looking in on little Bob Norris; they say he wants to sell the famous brown mare of his, that astonished us all with the Saltshires last winter. Tell you what, Winnie, if you and Laura make your way to the Zoo about four, or

four-thirty, I'll meet you there, somewhere in the aquarium.'

'Very well,' said his wife. 'Remember we dine at half-past seven with the Lloyds.'

'Oh! I had nearly forgotten.'

Winnie rose and went into the next room, followed by Laura and the two gentlemen; they naturally fell into a double *tête-à-tête*, Colonel Bligh talking on smoothly and pleasantly in a lowered tone to Mrs. Piers, who, though she rewarded his efforts with occasional smiles and laughter, seemed to Laura absent and preoccupied. Reginald tried to interest Laura and himself in a discussion of her affairs.

'How is the Admiral getting on? Is there any chance of his saving anything from the wreck of that confounded company?'

'I am afraid not. He seems to have forgotten about it, and we are all very content and happy together in dear, kind Mrs. Crewe's dovecot.'

'Are you?' shifting his chair to place himself between Colonel Bligh and her. 'I don't think there is another girl like you anywhere; or is your philosophy the result of compensation?'

'Has your new life so dulled your wits, Reginald, as to blind you to the conceit and presumption of such a speech?' returned Laura coolly, though it stung and startled her.

'By Jove! it was both,' cried Reginald, recalled by this rebuke. 'I did not think of what I was saying; still, you are a sort of girl one does not

meet everyday. Winnie tells me you made no end of charming sketches at Pierslynn. I wish you would accept a commission from me, and work one of them up into a picture.'

'No, Reginald, I am too busy just now.'

'That is, you don't choose to accept anything from me,' he returned, looking at her with a curious, bold, hard stare, which made her feel angry and regretful.

Angry at his effrontery, regretful for the subtle indefinite deterioration in him, which she felt rather than observed. To turn the conversation, she remarked how well Winnie was looking—better than ever.

'Yes,' replied Reginald; 'she is in great feather. Hasn't she come out, too? by George! she has a spirit of her own, but bright and true as steel. Do you know,' looking down, while his face darkened, 'I sometimes wish she had been less handsome and bewitching. Come along,' he exclaimed to Colonel Bligh, interrupting himself in a harsh tone. 'If we are not off we shall miss Norris;' and he walked away without a word to anyone.

Colonel Bligh made his adieux with much deliberation, volunteered a promise not to forget Goodwood, and with a profound bow to Laura, followed his leader.

Winnie sat silent for a minute, while Laura watched her. At last Winnie seemed to rouse herself, and changing her expression, exclaimed:

'He is very nice and agreeable, is he not?'

'Who, Reginald?'

'No, no! Colonel Bligh,' said Winnie, laughing. 'I flatter myself he is a great admirer of mine. Come, dear Laura, let us go and see my mother-in-law. I should like to know about poor Helen. Only fancy having to nurse Sir Gilbert! It must be an awful penance; you don't know what an odious little wretch he is.'

* * * * *

The following afternoon Laura returned very warm and weary. Monday was always a day full of work, and that of the least sympathetic kind.

It was the evening of the Admiral's monthly meeting, on which occasions there was always an early dinner for him. On this special Monday, Mrs. Crewe had gone out in a great state of excitement to visit a cousin, a post-captain in the Navy, who with his wife had arrived in town from some distant station, and had invited her and her son to dine with them; she had despatched a note to Denzil at his office, requesting him to join her at the Charing Cross Hotel. So Laura, having changed her dress for a cool creamy summer gown, and washed away the dust of the hot streets, partook of a refreshing cup of tea, and strolled into the little garden, where the ubiquitous Collins was hard at work with a huge watering-pot, Mrs. Crewe having carefully provided against the possibility of her finding any spare time.

The little plot of garden was sweet and fresh, the spreading horse-chestnut at the far side from

the house sheltering it from the sun, while Mrs. Crewe's taste and care preserved it from neglect or cockneyism.

Laura was glad to be alone for awhile, and yet anxious to turn her thoughts from the weary iteration that occupied and harassed them. She therefore took refuge in the book Denzil had given her! opening it with a slight sigh: 'How kind and thoughtful he is! I suppose if he marries his partner's daughter, there will be no more pleasant little gifts for me;' and then the feeling of how great a loss his friendship would be came upon her with a degree of pain that surprised her. She must get used to the idea, however, for some day their sympathetic companionship would cease. Denzil was the last man to whom a platonic liaison would supply the place of wife and home. He was so earnest and practical in all his ways of thought and action! Would it not have been happier for Winifrid to have married Denzil? He was so steady and so strong. Alas! it had come to her as a sudden revelation that Winnie was not quite happy; there was a sort of insecurity pervading even her brightest moments, and that pregnant expression which had fallen from her lips more than once, 'You know we are all right *now*,' implied so much that things were wrong once and might be again. Winnie herself was perhaps a little jealous and exacting; yet this was quite a new development of her character. In her girlish days she was the frankest and least self-seeking of mortals. Always

happily secure in her own grace and charm, without seeming the least conscious of either, it seemed as natural to her to give freely all help and kindness, and pleasure, as to breathe, asking nothing in return, yet rejoicing with youthful triumph in the readiness everyone showed to befriend and oblige her.

'She is changed in some mysterious way! some evil touch has brushed away the sweet, fresh bloom of her nature. Yet she is not so much changed as Reginald! I fear—I fear there are many dark days before him! He seems secure enough now! Does he know of Holden's death?'

Turning from her own conjectures, she resolutely fixed her eyes and thoughts on the pages of 'Die Brüder vom Deutschen Hause,' and read with increasing interest and relief.

She had got well into the story, though her 'hours of idleness'—comparative idleness—were few, and intended to read so long as the light lasted. But she had not been half an hour so occupied, and Collins had retired with the watering-pot, when the smell of a cigar attracted her attention, and looking up, she saw Denzil Crewe standing on the door-step. Their eyes met, and he came down the walk to her.

'I thought you had gone to dine with Mrs. Crewe at Charing Cross!' said Laura in some surprise.

'I thought it impossible to get away from the office in time, so I sent a line of explanation to our

host, and after all finished my work sooner than I expected.'

'Mrs. Crewe will be vexed.'

'I hope not. I shall see these relatives another day. Do you mind my cigar?'

'No—I like it on the air. I sometimes think I should like to smoke too; it must be soothing when one is worried.'

'It is,' returned Denzil, sitting down on the bench beside her, but carefully to leeward, 'though I hope you do not want a weed for that reason.'

'Oh! every one has their share; I have nothing especial to complain of.'

There was a pause, during which Denzil looked thoughtfully at the gravel, and then Laura said softly:

'I have been enjoying the amusement you kindly provided for me,' and she held up her book.

'Is it a thrilling tale?' asked Denzil absently.

'Certainly a stirring one.'

'I have not seen you since yesterday morning,' resumed Denzil rather abruptly; 'you spent the day with Mrs. Piers?'

'The greater part of it.'

'I went down to Mr. Gibbons's, the head of my firm. He has a nice place away down the South-Western line, near Malden. It is rather new and bare now, but will be pretty when the trees are older.' He paused, knocked the ash off his cigar, and resumed, still looking at the ground: 'We had a long con-

sultation, Mr. Gibbons and myself—rather a serious one for me.'

'Indeed!' returned Laura, feeling a little startled, and thinking, 'Is it possible he has been proposing for the daughter?'

'It seems they are very much dissatisfied with their agent in Japan,' he continued; 'so they want me to go out and look after him. More than that, they want me to stay there for a couple of years as their representative.'

He looked up gravely into Laura's eyes as he ceased to speak.

'Your mother would be terribly cut up,' she said; 'but what do you think of it yourself?'

'It would be advantageous to me in more ways than one,' he returned; 'but I have an unusual reluctance to leave home. Still'—he paused—'I shall have time to think about it, for they await replies to their letters, which cannot arrive before a month or five weeks; and,' stealing an inquiring glance at her which she did not observe, 'we have always been friends—that is, you have been so good as to treat me as—well, as a sort of brother, that I thought I should like to talk to you about it.' He said this with a slight hesitation and diffidence that sat well upon his serious strength.

'You know I shall be pleased and interested to listen,' replied Laura, turning to him with a sweet, frank smile.

Denzil was silent for a moment, and began again:

'If I go out I shall certainly increase the stability

and business of the firm, and they will give me a salary in addition to my share of the profits, besides other chances that may arise to push my fortunes. On the other hand, I dislike the idea of losing two or three years (in one sense they would be lost) in such a remote place, after all my frequent wanderings. The firm would soon find as good an agent as I should be, and my share of profit would not be diminished were I to decline. Besides all this, I have an especial reason for wishing to stay in England, though, for the same reason, I am more anxious than ever to make money.'

'Then it is hard to decide. Your *pros.* and *cons.* seems so equally balanced. It would be a great disappointment to your mother were you to leave her again, and she ought to be considered.'

'Ay, she ought indeed. If she knew all my motives, however, she would, I am certain, reconcile herself to my absence.'

'Then you incline to go?'

'Yes, if I do not lose more by going than by remaining here.' He rose as he spoke, and slowly paced round the garden twice, then, throwing away the end of his cigar, he resumed his seat beside her, and Laura looked up from her book again. 'I am very anxious to make money,' said Denzil, resting one elbow on his knee and his head on his hand speaking, as it were, out of his thoughts.

'Most men are, I suppose.'

'I am not greedy of riches; but independence, comfort, all men ought to strive for.'

'Poverty must be worse to men than women,' said Laura thoughtfully.

'I should have thought not; women want more of luxury than men; they cannot rough it like us.'

'In one sense, perhaps, yes; but they can renounce and endure more, while the dignity of independence is more essential to men. To be master of his own life must be the object of every man; even I like to feel that I am gradually winning the command of my own.'

'Even you! Do you know, I think you have a dash of masculine spirit?'

'I do not think I have any spirit at all; but,' irresistibly impelled to make a covert approach to the ever-present topic of her thoughts, 'it must be hard for a young man, full of life, of ability, conscious of birth beyond his position, yet chained down to inferiority by poverty, to resist grasping fortune, even though infringing the rights of another, another who would never miss them, and to whom he hoped to atone.'

'Is that the plot here?' said Denzil, touching her book and looking at her, a little surprised by the emotion of her tone. 'It is a very poor kind of a hero that would start his career with a theft. I hope he gets properly punished in the end.'

'I have not come to the end yet,' returned Laura, accepting the shelter unconsciously offered. 'No doubt he will be.'

'I should not think you would have any compassion for a character of that kind.'

'You ought to know the whole story before you blame me,' said Laura.

'I do not think you need fear my blame,' returned Denzil, with the soft kindly smile which occasionally lent beauty to his thoughtful face.

'I am not so sure. I fear you are disposed to judge me by too high a standard, and to feel impatient with me if I fail to attain it.'

'I deny that altogether! In short, you misunderstand me.'

'It will never do to begin misunderstanding each other after being so long *en rapport;* do not let me hear the word again,' returned Laura, rousing herself to reply with cheery playfulness.

'Very well,' said Denzil Crewe. 'Yet——' He stopped, and a short silence ensued. 'And how is Mrs. Piers?' he asked, breaking it suddenly.

'Remarkably well, and looking lovely.'

'No doubt,' he returned thoughtfully. 'She is lovely—that is just the word. She made a great impression on me when we first met.' He laughed slightly, and leaned back in his seat. 'I was inclined to build castles in the air respecting her; but I soon saw that was no use; saw it in time for myself.'

Laura did not know exactly what to say, but only for a moment. The frank confidence which existed between Denzil and herself was not to be clouded over by a trifle.

'Yes,' she exclaimed, 'I saw you were very much struck by Winnie, and at the time I wished she

might love you, for I always liked you myself,' concluded Laura, with the most unembarrassed, sisterly cordiality.

'And don't you wish it now?' asked Denzil, a quiet smile lighting up the depths of his grave eyes.

'Ah, no! How could I? No doubt everything has turned out for the best, I suppose; yet she might have been very happy with you. And God only knows what is before her!'

'Ay, God knows! I am obliged to you for your good opinion so far. Tell me, Laura—Miss Piers, I mean—do you never think of yourself?'

'Yes, often—too much. Why do you ask?'

'Because I never see any trace of self-love about you.'

'But I have it, though. I have a great longing to express myself; to put what I feel and think on canvas, or on paper. I suppose you would consider it a mere foolish fancy were I to tell you how Nature seems at times to speak to me of her wrongs—of the wonderful deafness and blindness we, her creatures, are guilty of towards her, and commands me to set forth her beauty, her law, her liberty.'

'It is a curious thought. I have dimly felt something of this when alone in the night-watches at sea. I suppose there is some curious affinity between us, or some of us, and physical inanimate nature. You ought to be a great artist with these ideas.'

'But I never shall be,' said Laura with a slight

sigh. 'I have at least acquired knowledge enough to be aware of the narrow limits to which I can attain. I am incapable of bold flights, or sustained effort, but I think I shall be able to maintain myself and enjoy. I am not sure that wealth could give me more.'

'Perhaps not. Yet it brings with it a certain amount of power; and that, to men at least, is always attractive.'

Here Collins made her appearance, and presented a note which had just arrived, adding:

'The man is waiting, miss.'

It was from Winnie, expressing her regret that in making an appointment for the next day, with her dearest Laura, she had quite forgotten the Trent wedding; and, as she would be late, and had some inexorable visits to pay, she must give up their plan of a drive together. Could Laura come out with her on Wednesday at two, do an afternoon's shopping, return to dress at the hotel, and accompany her to dine with Mrs. Piers? 'Send me a line by bearer,' was the conclusion.

'I must answer this,' said Laura, rising to go into the house.

'But you will come out again?' exclaimed Denzil, somewhat eagerly.

'I think so. It is pleasant here.'

But, when the note had been despatched, the Admiral was back again, and wanted Laura to look over some notes he had made of the proceedings at that day's meeting; and, though Denzil

smoked a second cigar, Laura did not return to renew their pleasant confidential talk.

* * * * *

'So!' cried Mrs. Crewe to her son, when she returned at the unusually late hour of eleven, 'you were not able to come. George Fleming and his wife were so sorry! So was I. Did you get any dinner? Being Monday, I know there was not much in the house.'

Denzil assured her he had feasted in the City.

'We had an excellent dinner. Green-pea soup, salmon cutlets, fore-quarter of lamb, and a gooseberry-tart. It must have cost them a pretty penny at hotel prices, and I am bound to say that I make better, lighter pastry myself. Still, they were very kind and hospitable, only I wish George Fleming had taken more interest in us twenty years ago, and helped you into the Royal Navy.'

'All things considered, I am not sorry he left me alone,' said Denzil drily; but his mother did not heed him.

'But it is just the way of the world! People are always ready to show you kindness and civility when you don't want it. Are you long in, Denzil?'

'I got home about half-past seven.'

'And found everyone out. Why in the world did you not come to dinner? We did not sit down till nearly seven.'

'I did not care much about it; I had a cigar in the garden and a chat with Laura Piers.'

'Oh!'—a prolonged 'oh.' 'I really think you and Laura are growing very fond of each other's society! I begin to understand why you were too late for the Flemings' dinner;' and she nodded to her son with an indescribably knowing smile, and an air of complete satisfaction.

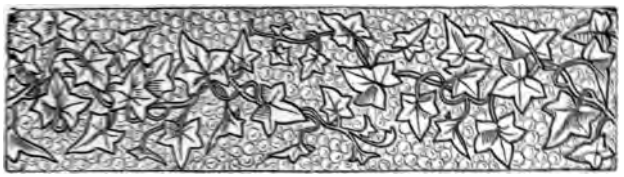
'Look here, mother,' said Denzil sternly, pausing in his 'quarter-deck' walk, in which he often indulged when in deep thought or confidential talk, 'you must not worry Laura with these sort of hints and innuendoes. It is seldom a fellow can have the comfort of a real, honest friendship with a sensible, noble-hearted girl like her, and I would not lose it for—well, for more than I would care to say! She is as frank, as much at ease with me, as if I had been born her brother; but if you begin to smile and nod in that fashion, she will just close up like a mimosa. Her wounds are still too fresh to permit her to think of any man as a lover. I know she would shrink from the idea, and no wonder; she has had a sore trial. If I can be of any comfort or help to her, let me, and see that you do not mar the innocent, healthy pleasure of our intercourse; promise me you will not,' pausing opposite his mother.

'My dear Denzil, you are quite awful when you assume that solemn tone. I am sure I never meant to make any mischief; one would think I was a gossipping, meddling old woman. Really, the whims and vagaries of young people nowadays are quite unaccountable; you are so over-

refined and—and I don't know what! I am sure there would be no harm done if you and Laura did take a fancy to each other. I should have no objection, and I am sure she would be a lucky girl; but——'

'Never mind all that,' said Denzil impatiently; 'just promise me to put such fancies out of your head, and out of your conversation.'

'Very well,' returned his mother readily, for Denzil's serious words were law to her, and after a short pause she resumed the subject of her dinner, of her hostess's dress, of the news she had heard, with many parenthetical topics.



CHAPTER V.

IT was a source of the deepest pleasure to Mrs. Piers (the dowager, as she was generally called by members of her own family), to give a little dinner.

Social distinction was very dear to her soul, and as the merely tolerated, impecunious step-mother of Sir Gilbert Jervois, Bart., she had had a long fast from such agreeable experiences. She was a fairly amiable, well-intentioned woman, to whom the idea of existence beyond the pale of the 'upper ten' was impossible and unendurable.

The fact that Laura bore the 'bar sinister' in her scutcheon rendered her hopelessly averse to Reginald's project of marrying his poor relation. His present wife she considered far from his equal. Still, she was the daughter of a rector, who was a scholar and a gentleman. Her mother, too, came of a respectable family, and on neither side was there any doubtfulness of character.

Young Mrs. Piers was handsome enough to

become the fashion—accomplished, graceful, well-bred, so that Reginald's strange disregard of his own interest in the matter of matrimony was a little more excusable in this second choice.

In fact, his mother felt it would only be to her own disadvantage if she opposed this fancy too persistently, so she gave way frankly and graciously, and she reaped her reward, for Winifrid was a pleasant, observant daughter-in-law. Perfect peace existed between them until shortly before the birth of the son and heir, when a difference of opinion on what seemed at first a trivial matter developed itself, though at the present stage of affairs the slight estrangement was shown by occasional double-shotted speeches and veiled allusions, chiefly understood by the speakers themselves.

On the present occasion Mrs. Piers's pretty little house looked its prettiest. It was freshly and suitably furnished, and sweet and bright with abundance of flowers from the Pierslynn conservatories. The dinner (furnished by a neighbouring confectioner) was irreproachable, as were also the waiters who accompanied it, and who might have been family retainers, so far as almost feudal solidity and respectability of appearance went.

It was the first time Mrs. Piers had entertained Mr. and Mrs. Trent. Though she had wept over the degradation of putting her son in a solicitor's office, she could not deny that in taking him for a very reduced fee Mr. Trent had done her and hers a substantial benefit, and she felt a fair amount of

gratitude. Moreover, they were successful people, and Mrs. Trent a very presentable person, who, though ready to accept and return civilities, knew how to hold her own, and never sought anyone.

Nearly all the company were assembled when Mr., Mrs., and Miss Piers were announced, and as the room which looked due west was carefully darkened to exclude the too powerful rays of the setting sun, neither Laura nor Winnie could at first recognise the guests. Mrs. Trent soon came forward to greet them, looking handsome and well dressed as usual, and then stood talking and laughing with Reginald near one of the open windows, while Mr. Trent bestowed his efforts on Winifrid, throwing occasional crumbs of conversation to Laura.

'I do not think you know Mr. Vignolles,' said Mrs. Piers, leading a mild-looking man with a big forehead and an eye-glass to her daughter-in-law; 'I had the pleasure of meeting him at Interlachen last year, as I think I mentioned to you.'

Mr. Vignolles placed himself beside the sofa where young Mrs. Piers and her cousin were sitting, and at once opened on Swiss hotels and prices, the best methods of organizing excursions, and the mistake people make in going to the nominally best hotels, where everything is dearer and nothing better than in the more second-rate establishments.

'It is nearly half-past seven,' said Mrs. Piers, coming across the room from where she had been

talking to Colonel Bligh; 'I do not think we can wait any longer. I expect a relative of ours who is anxious to renew his acquaintance with Reginald, an old diplomate, in very indifferent health, Sir Charles Dalrymple, and——'

Before she could finish her sentence, the most imposing of the two waiters threw the drawing-room door open and announced, 'Madame Moscynska.'

Laura felt that Winifrid started, but she could not see her face, for she turned quite away to ask Mr. Vignolles a question about pedestrian tours, which started him with renewed animation on a fresh branch of his favourite topic.

Meantime a little withered old gentleman, grey and bald, with a crush hat under his arm and a couple of decorations in his button-hole, glided in almost unnoticed in the wake of the Princess.

Round her everyone seemed to gather as she stood for a few moments receiving their greetings with her usual quiet grace and low-toned speech. She was arrayed in clouds of black tulle, caught up here and there with gold cords and tassels, gold butterflies fastening the folds on her shoulders, a rich, peculiar-looking gold necklace, and deep red roses in her pale gold hair, and in the left angle of her square low bodice the dark green leaves resting on her snowy, velvety skin.

Reginald approached last, and spoke to her apparently with pleasant, unembarrassed cordiality; then Laura heard him say, as if in answer to some

question, 'Yes, she is here,' whereupon the group divided. Madame Moscynska walked straight to where Winifrid sat, and holding out her hand, said:

'Dear Mrs. Piers, I am so glad to see you, looking so well too. I was very unfortunate to miss you when I called, though I came early.'

Winifrid had risen from her seat, and after an instant's hesitation, perceived perhaps only by Laura, she touched the hand presented to her, answering coldly:

'Thank you, I am quite well.'

Madame Moscynska, nothing abashed, next turned to Laura:

'I have the pleasure of speaking to Miss Piers, though we met but once; you are not to be easily forgotten,' she said, this time substituting the slightest possible courtesy for the offer of her hand, and accepting the chair presented by Mr. Trent, sat down in front of the cousins, and proceeded to talk to Winnie with quiet, soft persistence, which, in spite of the former's monosyllabic answers, was calculated to give the impression that they were on the most friendly terms.

This was soon interrupted by the stirring announcement that 'dinner' was ready, when Mrs. Piers presented the decorated old gentleman to Winnie as 'My relative, Sir Charles Dalrymple,' whereupon, with an elaborate bow and a little set speech, he offered her his arm; Reginald, acting as host, came forward to conduct Madame Moscynska, being the lady of highest rank present, and

Laura found herself told off to the connoisseur of Swiss hotels.

She felt strangely chilled and disturbed by the unmistakable dislike which Winnie evinced to her former 'guide, philosopher, and friend.' She had always felt an instinctive distrust of this fascinating personage, and was not sorry to see Winnie able to withstand her charm, whatever it might be, but that was no reason why she should be almost rude to her mother-in-law's guest. She (Laura) feared that Winnie would in some inexplicable way injure herself by what looked very like a display of unreasonable temper, though she had faith enough in her cousin to believe that there was some better reason than she knew for her evidently irrepressible aversion to the fair Anglo-Pole. A vague uneasiness took possession of Laura; she seemed to see, as through a glass darkly, that the smooth course of life that appeared to spread itself before the bright young wife was not without its pitfalls, and that Winnie lacked just those qualities, circumspection and self-control, which would enable her to pick her way through them unharmed.

Reginald, too, required peculiar treatment. These thoughts coursed each other through her brain while the soup was being served, while the bland waiter whispered a confidential inquiry as to her choice of wines, and her cavalier gave her some curious information touching the *potage à la Cressy* at the Alpen König Hotel at Bâle. Then she looked round and saw Reginald at the foot of

the table with Madame Moscynska on his right hand, Winnie between the ex-diplomate and Colonel Bligh, while she herself found Mrs. Trent on her right.

The dinner passed off very well; there was plenty of general talk, to which Reginald contributed his share, with not unfrequent asides to Madame Moscynska. Winnie was especially animated; her colour rose, and her laugh was frequently heard louder than usual as she exchanged repartees and reminiscences with her respective neighbours.

Laura could do little beyond replying to the observations of the gentleman next her; an unaccountable uneasiness weighed her down; she watched Winnie with nervous anxiety. There was no true merriment in her laughter, and more defiance than enjoyment in the brilliancy of her eyes; she fancied, too, that Colonel Bligh looked at her curiously, if admiringly.

At length, after a fair amount of eating and drinking, after some dozen subjects were started and run sharply to death in a hand gallop, and everyone seemed in good humour with themselves and their *convives*, Mrs. Piers gave the signal for the temporary separation of ladies and gentlemen.

Arrived in the drawing-room, Mrs. Trent bestowed her attention on Winifrid, and Madame Moscynska appeared quite occupied by a confidential conversation with her hostess, while for some minutes Laura occupied herself with a book

of photographs, that refuge of the destitute. She had scarcely finished examining it, however, when Mrs. Piers joined her, while Madame Moscynska calmly went across the room to Mrs. Trent and Winnie, who immediately lapsed into silence.

'Well, Laura,' said the lady of the house, who had fallen into a certain condescending familiarity with her during their residence together at Piers-lynn, 'what have you been doing with yourself since you came to town; why do you never come to see me?'

'I have been very busy, Mrs. Piers; I have had some fresh commissions—for copies only, 'tis true—and I have a new pupil.'

'Really, you are getting on. We shall see you on the line in the Academy yet. I am sure it is very fortunate you have so much talent. And how is Admiral Desbarres? I wish we could have persuaded him to join us this evening; he is a most interesting man. He is quite ruined, lost everything, Mr. Trent tells me; is he very much broken by his misfortunes?'

'Not at all. Indeed, were it not for his mania for giving, he would be very well off on his half-pay.'

'Perhaps so; but it is very unsatisfactory for *you*. Taking you up as he has done, he, of course, meant to provide for you. Now, he will have nothing to leave, for of course his income dies with him. You ought to persuade him to save.'

'Who? me, Mrs. Piers? I would not take so

great a liberty. I hope to be able to provide for myself.'

'That is always difficult for a woman. It is fortunate for you that art is the fashion. Work such as yours is by no means unladylike according to modern ideas.'

'I should think not,' said Laura, smiling. 'Were I worthy the name of artist, I should indeed be proud.'

'That is all very well; but the life is precarious. Still, as I said, it is very fortunate you have the gift you possess.'

'Yes; it atones to me for the stigma I am told rests on my father's birth.'

Laura could not account for the impulse which urged her irresistibly to utter these words.

Mrs. Piers looked confused and uncomfortable.

'Who has been so ill-natured as to rake up that old story, Laura?' she asked. 'It does no good, and only pains you, though you really need not trouble yourself about it. No one can quarrel with you for what is not your fault.'

'Nevertheless, according to the sublime injustice of the Decalogue, the sins of the fathers are almost always visited on the children,' said Laura sadly. 'And I dare say my poor father experienced this.'

'I do not think so. He was very charming, and very popular with the family; a great favourite with old John Piers—the late man's father—and quite at home at Pierslynn.'

'Is it possible?' said Laura, with a degree of

sarcasm which quite escaped the notice of Mrs. Piers.

'Yes, I assure you. My poor husband was so much abroad, that he knew less of him than the rest; but when he was in England we always had him at our house.'

Laura, with all her common-sense and cool judgment, felt moved to a kind of scornful indignation by the tone Mrs. Piers adopted as consolatory.

'What are you discussing so gravely?' asked Winnie, rising abruptly and coming to join them.

'Only my family history. Not a pleasant topic; let us change it,' said Laura, as Winnie sat down on the ottoman beside her.

'Oh!' cried Winnie disdainfully, 'that is not of much matter. There is no shadow of doubt on the clearness and nearness of *our* relationship, dear Laura, or our friendship either.'

Before Laura could reply, the door opened to admit the gentlemen.

Colonel Bligh and Reginald approached; the latter, taking his place on the opposite side of the ottoman from his wife, leaned over till his head nearly touched Laura's shoulder, and began to talk of Mrs. Crewe, of 'that son of hers,' and the Admiral, but in an intermittent way, evidently with an effort; while every now and then he glanced at Madame Moscynska and his wife. The former was speaking with much suavity to Sir Arthur Dalrymple as they stood together in one of the

windows; while Mrs. Trent was listening with apparent interest to Mr. Vignolles, the words 'route,' 'twelve hours from Strasbourg to Bâle,' 'not more than five-and-sixpence a day, allowing for the exchange,' occasionally catching Laura's ear.

Presently Madame Moscynska, accompanied by Sir Arthur Dalrymple, walked slowly across the room, and, addressing herself to Mrs. Piers, the former asked:

'I think, dear Mrs. Piers, you might settle a question Sir Arthur and I have been arguing. You were a good deal at Stolzstadt, were you not? Tell me, was it the Princess Stephanie or the Princess Marguérite that went mad about one of the equerries, and always fancied everything was covered with dust?'

Mrs. Piers had an entirely different version of the old scandal to offer for consideration, and Reginald vacated his seat to make way for Madame Moscynska, who threw in queries and suggestions, sometimes addressed to Winnie, who never made any answer, though she ceased to converse with Colonel Bligh, and sat in silence with elaborate inattention. At length, at the first pause in the dialogue, she rose and went to speak to Mr. Trent, who was examining some water-colour drawings which adorned the walls.

Reginald looked after her first with a slight frown and then with a smile, an unpleasant, mocking smile.

'Sing us one of your Polish songs,' said he to Madame Moscynska, with a certain familiarity which struck Laura. 'The one you used to treat us to when we lay off Fiume.'

She smiled, hesitated a moment, and then walked to the piano.

It was a wild, plaintive air, with a peculiar accompaniment, and she sang it admirably, dramatically.

'Isn't it expressive?' said Colonel Bligh to Winifrid. 'It is so utterly unlike drawing-room music; I remember she used to charm us with those queer ballads of hers when we were in the Adriatic.'

'Indeed!' said Winifrid.

'Winifrid, my dear, do play one of your German pieces,' said her mother-in-law, sailing up to her.

'It is a long time since I played, but I will do my best,' said Winnie, with something of her natural sweetness.

The excited colour had died out of her cheek, and Laura thought her voice unsteady. She played, however—played well—though not with quite her usual spirit, and was of course much applauded.

'Do you play, Miss Piers?' asked Colonel Bligh.

While she was saying she did not, Madame Moscynska came up with a small piece of manuscript music in her hand.

'Brava, brava, *chérie*,' said she, with an air of familiarity. 'I wish you would try this little "Pensée" for me. It is a *motif* by a young

countryman of mine in whom I am much interested;' and she placed the leaves before Winnie.

'I am sorry,' replied the latter, 'I cannot attempt it; it is so closely written I fear I could not read it correctly.'

'Ah!' said Madame Moscynska, with a subtle smile and a little contemptuous shrug, 'the *caro sposo* and I know you do not always interpret notes aright.'

'Do you?' said Winnie, rising slowly and turning to face her. 'Are you sure I was wrong?'

'Come, dear Mrs. Piers, you are so bright and quick, I am sure you must have Southern blood in your veins; do play us another of your charming morceaux. Mr. Piers, persuade her to play to us.'

'Oh! people get tired of long pieces,' said Reginald, who had not heard what passed, and coming across the room at Madame Moscynska's summons. 'As we are all here, let us settle about Goodwood; we have no time to lose.'

'Pray do not include me in your party,' said Winnie, low but distinctly; 'I do not feel equal to the fatigue. I have been doing too much; I am overdone now. If the carriage is here I will leave. You do not mind coming, Laura, do you?'

'But, Winnie, you were dying to go last week!'

'I prefer staying away now. Will you ask about the carriage, Reginald?'

'Yes, if you really feel too unwell to stay;' and muttering something about 'an infernal bore,' Reginald rang the bell.

'What is the matter, my dear?' said Mrs. Piers, hastening up.

'Only that London is a little too much for me, and I am not quite so strong as I thought,' said Winnie, smiling bravely. 'It is later than you think.'

'Indeed, you look very tired; you will be the better of a good night's rest,' said Mrs. Trent kindly.

'Will you come with me, Reginald?' said his wife, as, having taken leave of the company, and openly disregarded Madame Moscynska's offered hand, she paused beside him.

'Sorry I cannot; I promised to look in at the club with Bligh. Our good friend Laura will see to you; I'll not be late.'

'Will you take a glass of wine before you go, Winifrid?' said her mother-in-law, following her downstairs to the study or bookroom where the cloaks were left.

'No, thank you,' said Winnie. 'I must say I am infinitely surprised that you should have asked that woman to meet *me!* I may be foolish, wrong, suspicious, but I have a right to choose my own associates.'

'And I mine,' said the elder lady haughtily.

'Certainly, but not to force them on me.'

'I should be sorry to so——' checking herself and evidently trying to soothe. 'I had no idea your prejudices were so strong and *so* unjust, Winifrid! You are wrong, and ill-advised to treat

Princess Moscynska with such unmerited rudeness. For your own sake you should exercise more self-restraint. Just think how vexed Reginald must be. You are very foolish. Do you think that I should invite anyone to my house whose correct conduct I could for a moment doubt?'

'I am sure you would not *if* you doubted; but you do not,' cried Winnie, softening, and taking her mother-in-law's hand in both her own. 'Why do you not see that it is a battle for life I have to fight with this woman?'

'I am afraid, my dear, that you are not yet quite free from your feverish wanderings,' said Mrs. Piers severely. 'Do, pray, Laura, try to bring her to reason.'

Winifrid, with a slight despairing gesture, turned abruptly away and walked to the carriage, and her mother-in-law, saying in a low tone, 'This is a pleasant outlook for my son,' went back to her guests.

Laura, stupefied with surprise and distress, followed her cousin.

'Tell them to drive to the hotel,' said Winnie, in a strange, stifled voice. 'You will come with me, dear, will you not? You can take the carriage on afterwards.'

There was a moment's silence, and then Laura said:

'Winnie, dear Winnie, what is the meaning of all this? I am afraid you are very unwise.'

'You do not know; you do not know!' exclaimed Winnie, with a cry of anguish. 'I cannot tell you all now; but I will. I thought never to have told you. I hoped that I had beaten off the foe, but the battle is still before me, and I cannot fight her with her own weapons; yet I fear any others are nearly useless,' and she threw her arms round her cousin, who was shocked to feel how she trembled and sobbed.

'But you cannot doubt your own husband, who loves and admires you! You cannot fear a woman so much older, so much less beautiful than yourself! I think you must have let some morbid fancy get possession of you; try and clear your mind of it. These suspicions are too horrible.'

'They are,' returned Winnie more calmly. 'And if you, too, turn against me and re-echo the cry that I am foolish, morbid, mistaken, I shall not keep my senses. I have striven hard enough against my own convictions; now they have come back upon me in an overwhelming tide. I am not angry with Reginald. I do not so much doubt him, as I fear *her*; for he is weak, or—or something like it, and she is merciless, unfathomable, and my implacable enemy.'

'My own dear Winnie,' said Laura, more impressed by her cousin's words than she liked to own, 'you surely must exaggerate. Of course, till I hear your reasons, I cannot judge whether you do or not. Yet it is impossible Madame Moscynska can be so deliberately wicked; one rarely meets

with such characters. You are excited; you are not yourself. To-morrow you may feel differently.'

'Heaven grant it!' said Winnie, with a low, shivering sigh; 'for to-night I despair.'

Leaning her head against Laura's shoulder, she kept silent for the few minutes that intervened until they stopped at the hotel. Then Winnie started up.

'I will come and have a long afternoon with you to-morrow, if you can give me the time. When may I come?'

'Not before four; I will make it a point to be at home then, and take care to be alone. And, Winnie, try, dear, to be more prudent; conceal your feelings. It will not do to irritate Reginald, or so dangerous a woman as you believe Madame Moscynska to be.'

'You do not understand,' replied Winifrid mournfully. 'I must defend my outposts, or all is lost. Good-night, dear Laura; good-night.'

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. CREWE and Denzil were sitting in the dining-room with both windows open, for the latter was indulging in a cigar as he read, and his mother was busy arranging her letters, a very confused pile of ragged papers, making many comments and explanations respecting the writers for her son's information, to which he occasionally replied by inarticulate utterances that nevertheless quite contented her.

'You are early, my dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, as Laura entered. 'I did not expect you for an hour yet.'

'Winnie was tired, so we came away a little sooner than the rest,' said Laura, throwing aside her cloak and standing by the table in her long black silk dress, which, with her white lace fichu and ruffle, suited her unusually well.

Her gentle dignity of bearing struck Mrs. Crewe as though she had never noticed it before. She

felt, as most did who knew Laura, that there was something in her to trust and lean upon, an inner light and force which, though not easy to fathom or define, would never fail or mislead. Thinking thus, Mrs. Crewe did not speak immediately, and, looking from mother to son, Laura said with a smile:

'How home-like and happy you seem, sitting comfortably together. Your mother is quite ten years younger since you settled down at home, Denzil.'

'Yes,' he returned, a soft gratified look stealing over his face, and a slight increase of colour, perhaps at Laura's unconscious use of his Christian name, perhaps because he knew that his mother's halcyon days would not last long.

'We are all the happier and more home-like now you have joined us,' said Mrs. Crewe, holding out her hand to Laura. 'You are looking uncommonly well, my dear. You have quite a colour; hasn't she, Denzil?'

'Of course I have, if you notice it,' returned Laura, laughing and blushing vividly.

Denzil made no reply, but placed a chair for her, and threw the end of his cigar away. Laura sat down with a sigh, thinking of the terrible possibilities her conversation with Winnie had disclosed, and contrasting them with the safe and happy atmosphere she then breathed, the ingredients in which were so simple.

'Well, dear, and what had you for dinner?' began Mrs. Crewe, hastily tying up a parcel of selected

letters, and tearing up the refuse with much energy.

Laura replied to the best of her ability, but acknowledged that many items escaped her memory.

'You should always try to notice and remember dishes,' said Mrs. Crewe gravely. 'The ideas they suggest will be of use to you when you have a house of your own, and give dinner-parties.'

Laura laughed low and pleasantly.

'Could you fancy me giving dinner-parties?' she said. 'All that sort of society seems quite far away out of my reach and capacity; my world will never stretch beyond a studio and a few friends.'

'You by no means know what your capacities are yet,' said Denzil, as if to himself.

'What did Mrs. Piers wear? I mean the dowager,' resumed Mrs. Crewe, and a severe examination as to the toilets of the company ensued. Then, after a slight break in the dialogue, Mrs. Crewe remarked: 'I suppose young Mr. Piers still seems very attentive and taken up with his wife?'

'Yes, of course! Why should he not?' cried Laura, with a slight start; the question jarred strangely upon her. Could Mrs. Crewe divine that there was any reverse to the bright picture of their lives? 'That is, as attentive as good manners permit. Why?'

'Oh! I have no particular reason; only it strikes me that Reginald Piers will not be the most constant man in the world. He was very nice and

pleasant, but I always thought him unsteady. The fancy of the moment is all in all with him. I do hope she will know how to manage him.'

'Come, come, mother!' cried Denzil, smiling. 'You are an awful Cassandra sometimes.'

'I am nothing of the kind, Denzil; and even in joke, my dear boy, you should not call your mother names; these nautical allusions are quite beyond my comprehension.'

'I beg your pardon, mother,' quite gravely.

'Is it necessary to manage?' asked Laura. 'Surely with truth and tenderness one might venture to keep a straight course.'

'And win the goal,' said Denzil, in a low tone.

'I am not so sure,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe. 'You see, one can never know what a man thinks, or what crotchets he may have taken into his head. It takes two to make truth of any use—one to speak and another to hear it; and most men are vexed when a woman *is* true and reasonable. It does not amuse them; they are so fond of nonsense they can correct, and mistakes they can smile down at.'

'I protest, mother, you are ferociously severe! Why, I flattered myself you were fond of your son's sex.'

'So I am,' she returned eagerly. 'I always like to have men about me; that is the reason I understand them so well. They can be very kind and useful, but the best of them require management; they like it, too—so much the better for us.'

'You must not let your son too much behind the

scenes,' said Laura. 'He will be quite unmanageable when he marries, if you initiate him into the mysteries.'

'Oh, Denzil is different from other men,' cried his mother. 'Do you know, he has been making such a delightful plan; I hope you will agree to it. There is a cottage belonging to a friend of his to be let for two months, down somewhere on—on what coast, Denzil?'

'Dorsetshire.'

'Yes; Dorsetshire. It seems that his friend wants to take his little girl away to London for medical advice, or some operation to be performed, so Denzil proposes that we exchange houses. You and I, and the Admiral (if we can persuade him), will go down there the week after next, and Denzil will come down when he can, from Saturday till Monday (it will be holiday time then, and you can take your paints and things and work away). Think of the fresh air, and the sea beach, and the wild flowers, the eggs and the milk, the cliffs (Denzil says there are splendid cliffs), and cheap fish. When can you manage to start, my dear Laura?'

'It would be very delicious,' exclaimed Laura immediately, seeing refreshing visions of blue waves and changing cloud shadows; 'but I must arrange so much, and oh! I cannot go while Winnie and Reginald are here.'

Her face changed as she spoke, and the dread of Winnie's promised disclosures came like a grey mist wreath wrapping her heart in a chilling vapour

and chasing the colour from her cheek. Denzil looked sternly and steadily at her as she spoke, but she did not heed him.

'It is growing late,' he said abruptly; 'we must not keep Miss Piers up. I shall wish you good-night. You can discuss the question of Barton's cottage to-morrow. He wants to come up here the first week in August.'

So saying, he rose, kissed his mother's brow in passing, and wishing Laura good-night, left the room.

'Dear me! how very sudden Denzil is sometimes,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'That is the misfortune of not having been in "the Service." Nice and good as he is, he cannot help a certain amount of the *je ne sais quoi* which men in the mercantile marine contract.'

'I am sure,' cried Laura heartily, 'there are Royal Navy sailors not comparable to Denzil in manner, or, indeed, in any way.'

'You are a dear, kind, discriminating girl. But just think what a chance this is of going out of town, my love, without a shilling of expense beyond the railway fares, and at this season we can get excursion tickets. Indeed, I expect to make a considerable saving, for of course milk, butter, eggs, vegetables, and, I imagine, butcher's meat, will be considerably cheaper than here. I believe there is a vegetable and fruit garden, and a boat; we might fish for ourselves. Collins will remain here, and I wish them joy of her! She behaved shamefully

to-day, and sent up the new potatoes perfectly raw,' etc., etc.

* * * * *

After careful consideration, Laura decided not to mention Winnie's intended visit to Mrs. Crewe, and trust to the chapter of accidents to secure them an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*, and accident befriended her. The midday post brought a note from Mrs. Crewe's cousin, requesting her help and counsel in a severe day's shopping, as she was leaving town the next day.

Mrs. Crewe, therefore, made a hasty luncheon, and departed full of importance; so, when Laura returned, flushed and eager, almost fearing she was late, she found the coast clear, and had hardly divested herself of her outdoor attire when Winifrid arrived. She was looking very pale, and her eyes had a pained, fixed expression which, to Laura at least, bespoke mental strain.

'How nice to find you all alone, dear Laura. Since I made up my mind to tell you everything, I have been thirsting to begin,' she cried, as she embraced her cousin.

'Mrs. Crewe is out for the whole afternoon. I think we may stay in the drawing-room.'

'Oh! no, no,' said Winifrid feverishly, 'I can only tell all I have to tell in your own room, with the door locked. To think that I am but fifteen months a wife, and have such fears, such doubts! Is it not cruel?'

'Come, then, dear,' was Laura's only answer, and

they ascended to her chamber, where the owner installed her guest in the only comfortable chair she possessed, locked the door, and composed herself to listen.

'I must begin a long way back—a long, long way back,' said Winifrid, drawing off her gloves and removing her bonnet in an absent, hurried way.

'Tell me,' put in Laura, as she paused, 'was Reginald very, very angry and cross?'

'No, I have scarcely seen him since. He was very late, and this morning he was odd and cold, and a little contemptuous. He asked how I was, and when I tried to tell him that he did not know how I had been provoked, he laughed, and said, "I dare say Madame Moscynska could manage a dozen of you! When you are more a woman of the world, you will not make so much ado about nothing. However, you must smooth down my mother the best way you can. *She* is the belligerent party in this instance," and then he went out. I am more distressed when he is like *that*, than by his anger.'

'Now tell me everything,' said Laura.

'When we first went to Paris,' began Winnie abruptly, and then broke off to exclaim, with a quiver in her voice, 'Oh! what a happy, happy time it was! When I look far away to those days I feel how great, yet how gradual is the change that has come over our life. And we might still be so happy if only—yes—in those days I was selfish in my enjoyment, I scarcely ever thought of

you; and if I did, I put it away, because it was so painful to remember that my gain was your loss. Well, when we arrived in Paris, Madame Moscynska called immediately. I had heard Reginald speak of her, and I was quite pleased to know any friend of his. I thought her charming. She seemed so charmed with me; she used to put me in such good-humour with myself, and she used to discuss what dresses would suit me with Reginald, as if she were a loving elder sister. Then, in some way I cannot describe, a little cloud came between us, I scarcely knew how. I grew frightened at the costly things she wanted me to choose, and would not be persuaded to have them, and sometimes Reginald sided with me. Then I used to feel a little left out when they talked for hours of their adventures in that yacht, though I was ashamed of myself, and tried to seem interested, and *was* sometimes. Then we went away, and did the Italian lakes. Ah! how delightful that was, until poor Reggie was ill at Florence. He has never been quite—quite the same since. We came straight back to Paris, and found the Princess just arrived, from I do not know where. She was very kind and helpful, and certainly managed to amuse Reginald wonderfully. She dined with us every day, and then she wanted still to buy everything for me, but I resisted. I was not cross—indeed I was not; I only said I must learn to act for myself. Reginald hated so to be left alone just then that she was very useful.'

'Well?' asked Laura, as she paused; 'an indefinable estrangement had grown up between you?'

'Yes, yes; I am dwelling too long on this time. One evening we were sitting after dinner, and they were talking of their travels. I had got my old piece of lace-work, to be doing something; the Princess had just said, "You remember that night we lay off Istria," when I turned to find my needle, and caught a look from her to my husband, a look I cannot describe; it made my heart stand still, it haunted me, but not for long. Reginald, who was very changeable, was so good, so tender, so taken up with me, that I put away my doubts, yet I never felt quite the same again to Madame Moscynska.

'Then we came to England. She happened to be coming too, and gradually I began to feel that she was like an evil spirit, bringing misfortune to me. I cannot describe how she pervaded everything, how she charmed everyone; Mrs. Piers was fascinated by her. But for a long time Reginald did not mind her much; she used to spend two or three days with us now and then, but she was chiefly at her uncle's, Lord Dereham's, and we met at all the dinners and parties; and as certain as we met, she did or said something that made me look foolish or awkward, or *bête*. It is impossible to tell you the effect she produced upon me! and no one perceived it save myself. I felt she hated me. One day I dared to open my heart to Reggie, and told him how she affected me. He

was not cross, or unkind, but he laughed and kissed me, and exclaimed, "Jealous already, Winnie? If you take *that* view of our friend, there is no use talking reason to you." Then I felt I was fighting the air, and all the time the air was poisoning me. I tried to think myself foolish, morbid. Oh! the pain, the struggle of that time. And Mrs. Piers openly sided with Madame Moscynska, and in a covert way rebuked me for my bad temper, narrow jealousy, want of consideration for my husband's comfort. Then Reginald began to have a way of looking round as if he wanted somebody when he came into a room, even at home. But in April last we had gone to a great dinner at Dairysford, and I noticed that Reginald nearly cut the Princess. There was a Polish cousin of hers there, Graf somebody, a very handsome, wicked-looking man. He and the Princess were always talking unknown tongues together. After that I was very unwell, could not go anywhere. Mrs. Piers had gone back to town, and Madame Moscynska was talking of going to Poland—she was always hinting at plots and politics—but Reginald was very kind, and stayed much with me.

'One afternoon I had gone into his dressing-room to put a new pair of braces I had worked for him on his table. It was very untidy, papers and things scattered about. His man had not been in to arrange it, so I began mechanically to put it right. I gathered up the letters, most of them on business, I knew, and went to put them into a little

box or case that closed with a spring and stood on his table. The key was out, but evidently had not been turned, for when I touched the spring it flew open, and on the top lay an open note. It had no address, but I knew the writing, and I remember every word of it.'

'Can you repeat it?' asked Laura, deeply, painfully interested.

'Yes,' said Winifrid, slowly, with a far-away look in her eyes as though reading something at a great distance. 'It was this:

'"You were wrong to doubt; circumstances have been very hard for me; nevertheless, I will give you the assurance you demand; more, I promise all you wish in future, provided." Then a long dash. "I have struggled with an untoward destiny all my life; must it overtake me now? I shall be in town on the 25th, when I can see you safely. You have cruelly misjudged me. If only you will hear me, all may be as it was before, when there was yet hope for us both. Let me see you as usual on Wednesday.

'"Ever yours,

'"H."

'I knew the H. was for Hedwig. When I read this, everything seemed to stand out before me in clear blazing light. "Before" meant before he married me. *I* was the obstacle, and by some means I was to be effaced. I cannot say how I felt; deep, black despair seemed to wrap its cruel

arms round me. What was life to me without Reginald and love? And I was so young.'

She covered up her face as if she could not bear the memory of that terrible moment.

'I did not feel angry with Reginald,' she resumed. 'I felt sorry for him, as if we were both in the hands of some merciless executioner. I think I lost my senses for a moment; then I remembered it was Wednesday. I shut up the box, and put the note in my pocket, went back to my own sitting-room, and rang the bell:

'"Where is Mr. Piers?"

'"He went out about an hour ago to fish in the Dairysford pool," said the servant.

'"Ask him to come to me when he returns."

'I did not know what I was going to do or to say. I was desperate, determined to end this state of things, to know what I had to dread, what to renounce, before another day had gone over my head.'

She stopped for a moment; her breath came quickly; she seemed parched and fevered. Laura pressed her hand between both her own, and rose to bring her a glass of water. Winnie drank it eagerly, and recommenced:

'I do not know how I lived through the time till Reginald came back, and I could not tell if it were two hours, or twenty minutes, or a lifetime, before I saw him come into the room. It was so terribly long, so frightfully short, I only know I ran to him, for, as I said, I did not feel angry with him, but

wildly frightened, and burning to free him and myself from some evil spell. I could not believe he preferred anyone on earth to me. I ran to him, and cried, "Oh! Reggie, dear, what is this? What can it mean?" holding up the note before him. Oh, Laura! I shall never forget his face. He looked at me so that I shrank away. He grew darkly red, and then hissed out, as if every word were a curse, "Where did you find this?" snatching it from me.

'"In your despatch-box," I said, for his tone roused me. "I went to put away some letters that were lying about, and I found Madame Moscynska's note open."

'"How dare you pry into my private papers? Have you a false key, or how did you manage to open the box? By heaven, she will think I have betrayed her!" and he began to pace up and down furiously, tearing the note into a dozen fragments. I was stunned. Not a word to soothe me; not a syllable of apology or explanation; his only thought appeared to be of *her*. I watched him silently; at last he exclaimed: "Have you talked to anyone else of your insane suspicions?" Then my head seemed to give way, and I just remember holding out my arms to him and crying, "They are foolish and insane, are they not? No, no; I would not say a word of them to anyone but you, and you will put them all away out of my head." He turned to me with a changed expression, and then I think he caught me as I was falling, and I can remember nothing more till I came to myself in

mortal agony, and Reginald was beside me, and the doctor, and I thought I was dying. It was not death, however, but a new life that came to me.'

Again she stopped, and a few tears relieved her.

'I was very, very ill; I scarcely cared to live; only as the days went by, and I saw Reginald constantly near me, so kind, and anxious, and tender, I began to hope and to revive, and then I recovered slowly. I could not put any questions to Reginald, but I used to look at him, I know, with my soul in my eyes; and one day, almost the first I was able to sit up, he said, "Now you are stronger, I want to explain all that stupid affair of Madame Moscynska's note." And I, with my hand in his, listened, glad to believe anything rather than break the delicious calm of that moment of repose. He went on then to say that he feared he had been very brutal, but that when a lady confided her difficulties to a gentleman, it was too provoking to have it discovered by another woman, and that an unfriendly one. He said that the truth was, Madame Moscynska had asked him for a loan of money, some time before; that he had hesitated to give it because he thought it was to help her cousin, who was a scamp. The Princess was deeply offended, and did not speak to him for several days; then she looked so miserable that he sent her a little line to say he was willing to oblige her. The note I found was an answer to this, and as it was difficult to find an opportunity for private conversation at Dairysford, and my jealousy cut her off from Pierslynn, she

was obliged to make a rendezvous in the grounds, and then he tried to remember the words of the letter. *I* helped him. He explained it all as bearing on this loan. The "hope for both of us," he said, meant for herself and her cousin, both of whom were much embarrassed. The "seeing him safely in London" was safe from the interference of Lord Dereham, as Madame Moscynska was always afraid of her uncle knowing the state of her affairs.'

'Was not that a very natural explanation?' asked Laura thoughtfully.

'It seemed so to me,' said Winifrid; 'it may be so still. I was too glad to believe it then, only Reginald said nothing explanatory about seeing him as usual on Wednesday, and I would not be so exacting as to allude to it, yet I did not *quite* forget it. But I was glad to be quiet and to believe. He was so dear and kind. Ah! he loved me—he still loves me! I have not lost him yet! I began, in my returned happiness, to believe I had been unjust to the Princess, that a condition of nervous excitement had disposed me to exaggerate. Reginald told me she was going away on a long visit to some relations in Poland, and that he wished me very much to receive her before she left. I consented; I was so glad she was going.

'She came, more softly calm, more soothingly pliable, than ever. I felt in an instant that she was determined to win me—as before, I felt instinctively that she deliberately set herself to cross and

neutralize me. I was wonderfully keen, and feared nothing. After she had looked tenderly and thoughtfully at the baby, as if divining his future (I know she detested infants), and talking of the interest everyone took in me, etc., she said, gently raising those queer green eyes of hers to mine, "Before I go I must confess my sins to you, dear Mrs. Piers, and tell you how generous and kind your husband has been." So she went on to say that both her cousin (who was like a brother to her) and herself had got into difficulty in consequence of being mixed up in some political schemes; that at the present moment they were greatly embarrassed, and she had ventured to ask Reginald for help, which he had kindly and readily accorded. I said I was glad he could be of use, and then added, "He has, I see, told you that your note on that subject fell into my hands, and probably that I misinterpreted it? I was foolish, perhaps, but, dear Madame Moscynska, you should not write so ambiguously."

'She looked surprised, but did not change countenance, and paused a little before she replied: "Have you not always misinterpreted me, *ma belle amie?* I have felt it deeply. Nevertheless, I shall not offend again; I am on the point of returning to my own dear unhappy land for a long sojourn." Then my mother-in-law came in, and they talked till they tired me, and I had great difficulty in getting composed and comfortable after she had gone, so much had her "confession" disturbed me.

'Though I blushed for my own suspiciousness, I was always wondering if they had arranged her visit, and what she should say, between them. I was not so well after this, and then I began to yearn for you. I knew Reginald was a little reluctant about sending for you, but I was determined to overcome that. I had a sudden bitter conviction that nothing and no one was quite true and real but you. I think so still, dear, dear Laura!'

A sudden choking sob stopped her utterance for a moment.

'At any rate,' she resumed, 'Madame Moscynska went away, and I began to forget her. Reginald was so dear and good; and though I knew Mrs. Piers thought me jealous, exacting, narrow, she was kind enough, so I began to dream of happiness again—and yet—and yet the same complete love and trust I once had never quite came back. There were looks and tones of Reginald's that in some way always set me doubting, I did not know what.'

'I fear you tormented yourself ingeniously,' said Laura, with a sigh.

'I tried hard not,' returned Winnie; 'but I felt more exacting, less even-tempered than I used to be. Then you came. That did me a world of good. The days you spent with us were the best I had had for a long time; and Reginald was very nice, was he not? more at ease with you. And it was so nice when Mrs. Piers went, even when Reginald went away, until one morning—do you remember?—probably you do not, you mentioned

accidentally that Madame Moscynska had not gone abroad. It gave me a great shock. However, Reginald came back so soon, and everything looked so fair, that I did not disturb myself much till I came up to town, and found that dreadful woman here; found that she had laid her plans, that she had got everyone on her side, and that she was resolved to force herself on me, resolved to keep fast hold of Reginald. Laura! I do not know what witchery there is about her; but I fear as much as I hate her, and I strive to deliver my husband from her, as much for *his* sake as my own. But, ah! he is slipping from me. The moment she appears, there is a subtle change in him. Indeed, he is greatly changed. He is so much more "on guard" than he used to be. Yet, Laura, I do not, will not, despair. If only I had Reginald to myself, all might yet be well; but, dearest, you must never let her win *you* over; never let her persuade you that she is a simple, well-intentioned woman, not quite stiff enough for English ideas, and that I am jealous, exacting, crazy.'

'She shall never do that!' cried Laura warmly. 'I have always had an instinctive distrust of her; yet, dear, dear Winnie, I do think you have tormented yourself unnecessarily. Try not to worry yourself, and things will mend.'

'Not if I am off my guard. She shall never display herself to the world as my intimate friend; and yet I almost tremble to think how she nearly defied me last night; that showed she felt pretty

sure of her ground. And she is going down again to Dairysford, Laura, where I cannot escape her without a fracas! I am going to get Dr. Prior to order me to Carlsbad or somewhere, and once away, I shall feel safe; Reginald cannot refuse to come with me.'

'Yes, perhaps that would be well,' returned Laura, and fell into deep thought.

How should she add to Winnie's burden by disclosing the facts which had lately come to her knowledge? How shatter their home, their prosperity? And yet might not the revelation of her knowledge, the assertion of her claim, rouse Reginald to repentance, to a sense of duty? They surely might arrange between them so that he need not be impoverished, and yet that her rights should be acknowledged.

While she thought, Winnie was saying that Reginald seemed to have taken up his idea of a public career again, especially when their member, Mr. Challoner, was dangerously ill, about a fortnight ago; but now she was happy to say that gentleman was recovering rapidly, so there would be no necessity to remain at Pierslynn for any political reason. How Madame Moscynska would revel in an election, and how indefatigable she would be about it! 'It is a direct intervention of Providence on my behalf that poor Mr. Challoner is better,' added Winnie, rising, and looking at her watch. 'Dear Laura, I have been talking to you for more than an hour, and it has been a relief. I do not seem so hopeless

as I was. You do not think things so bad. What do you think, Laura?'

'Oh, Winnie, it is impossible Reginald can care for anyone but you. Be as resolute as you like against Madame Moscynska, but be patient and careful, control yourself, and Reginald will respect you all the more. He is only amused with a clever companion; you see, as soon as she is out of sight he forgets her.'

'He seems to do so; but I am growing to distrust him and everything; and as to self-control, that woman has the most diabolical power of stinging me with words no one else can understand. Now last night no one save ourselves, or perhaps Reginald, could understand why I grew so angry; but her audacity in reminding me of my not always interpreting notes aright was more than I could bear. Now I must run away. I have several visits of ceremony to make. Come to me soon; the day after to-morrow.'

'Yes, if I can. Good-bye. Be patient, dearest Winnie, patient and strong; these evil days will pass away.'

'Adieu, my own wise Laura.'

A hearty kiss, and she was gone.

CHAPTER VII.

A FEW days passed, during which Laura was too much occupied to seek her friend often, and Winnie too much engaged to visit Laura.

The long history which Winnie had recounted of her strange struggle with Madame Moscynska haunted Laura.

It was like the plot of a bad novel put into action; she could not believe that poison so loathsome could arise from anything within the circle of lives pure and natural as Winnie's and, she had hitherto believed, Reginald's. Did Winnie exaggerate things? Was it possible that Reginald would vex his own dear wife rather than give up the second-rate pleasure of being adroitly flattered? Certainly she had good reason to doubt her cousin, her supplanter. Nevertheless, if she perceived that he was weak, illogical, unprincipled enough to rob her, she still believed that his heart was loving and considerate. Even towards herself his intentions had not been so bad as his conduct finally proved.

It was marvellous even to herself how she shrank from exposing him. By degrees she made up her mind to let herself drift with the current of circumstances to some yet undiscovered anchorage, some opening in the difficulties that hemmed her in, through which she might steer her course.

* * * * *

Meantime the stream of events rolled on, not visibly affected by the heart-histories being enacted beneath or beside it.

Mrs. Crewe was deeply engaged in preparation for their sojourn at the seaside. The Admiral, who had been looking ill and worn for some time, was persuaded to join them, after a short visit to his brother. Laura had to use some persuasion to induce her patron to wait for a month or two for his bespoken copy; for schools were breaking up, and families leaving town, so that she had not much difficulty in arranging her holiday.

She looked forward with a great sense of longing to the repose and entire change of scene which her visit to the coast promised.

As regarded Winnie, she would soon be leaving town; and even were she to be always near her, she could do little to help her. A wife must fight her own battles and 'dree her own weird.' No third person could interfere without doing more harm than good. Surely the present clouds would blow over, and Winnie's sky be blue and bright, as it ought to be.

She herself, despite her doubts and cares, felt, in

some unaccountable way, a fresh interest in her life; a vague, quiet hope, such as she had not experienced for many months, and under this influence was working at some nearly finished designs with new energy one morning, intending to call on Winnie in the early afternoon to tell her of their approaching departure, and learn her plans.

She had almost put the last touch to her drawing, and had paused, pencil in hand, seeing a vision of the beach with the rippling waves stealing up, when the door was suddenly opened, and Winnie flashed in upon her, radiant, smiling, lovely in sapphire, blue sateen, and Breton lace.

'Winnie, dear! What has happened?' cried Laura, starting up to meet her.

'All that is good and fortunate!' said Winifrid, embracing her. 'Last night Mrs. Piers dined with us; she was wonderfully pleasant and amiable, and brought a letter from Helen. It appears that Sir Gilbert is recovering so slowly, and is still so weak, the doctors insist on his going to one of the German, or rather Austrian, spas; Franzensbad, I think. You may fancy my delight when Reginald exclaimed, "What do *you* say to trying the waters, or the air, Winnie? It would set you up for the winter; and we might take baby, too, if you liked." I hugged him on the spot. Think, dear, of his proposing the very thing I wanted! I am sure I have done him injustice. He wants to escape Pierslynn while that dreadful woman is at Dairysford as much as I do.'

'I am delighted to hear this!' exclaimed Laura, with most genuine sympathy. 'All will go well now!'

'Yes, I hope so; I believe so. I was so delighted, I felt as if I trod on air. We went to a dance at Lady Delmaine's. She and her husband are Saltshire people. It was charming, and I know I looked well. Colonel Bligh and a heap of men quite surrounded me. Oh! it was great fun, and I think Reginald was pleased. I wish you had been there, it was such a nice party. This morning Reggie and I have been busy making out the route and our plans. We are to start on Tuesday, and Mrs. Piers is going down to Pierslynn for a month or two with a cousin of hers who often stays with her. So the place will not be quite deserted.'

'That is well arranged. How glad I am to see you so happy!' said Laura, embracing her. 'Now you must banish all suspicion and uncomfortable thoughts.'

'Oh! I will—I will indeed. I am too glad to renounce them all. And it will be nice to have dear Helen Jervois with us. Sir Gilbert is always horrid, but if he is weak and ill, he will be more manageable. Sybil is to come to her grandmother at Pierslynn. Now, dearest Laura, tell me what are you going to do? I trust you will soon escape the heat, and dust, and noise of London. Oh! dear, I want you to be happy—happy as if I had never come across you; you know I do, Laura;

and I think—I think you are looking like your own self—only better. Are you happy, Laura?'

'I am,' said Laura, quietly but earnestly. 'I am at rest; I have plenty of congenial occupation; I have hope of independence in the future, and kindly companionship in the present. Ought I not to be thankful and content? If I have still an anxiety, why, I trust to the great Guide to make it right. Do not trouble yourself about me.'

'You deserve all good,' said Winnie, tears rising to her eyes. 'You must—you will have happiness and success.'

'To know that you are relieved from your fears will give zest to my holiday.'

A few more descriptions of their plans, a little more dilating on her own heart's delight and restored confidence, a pressing invitation to dinner on the last day of their sojourn in London, and Winnie left her friend nearly as much excited and overjoyed as herself.

After this interview, Laura did not see Winifrid alone save for a hurried moment when bidding her good-bye the evening she dined with her and Reginald.

She was, as usual, ill at ease with the latter, in spite of all her own efforts, and his careful, almost successful attempts at friendly, unstudied cordiality. She was always imagining how he must feel looking at her, hearing her voice, and knowing that he

had robbed and deceived her; that he had sought her only to secure his plunder, and but for her accidentally overhearing his avowal to Winnie he would have sacrificed them both unrelentingly. Whatever his passion for the latter, it had evidently been his intention to marry herself.

Winnie was all bright anticipation, and with Colonel Bligh, the only other guest, kept up the conversation and animation of the *partie carrée* without pause or effort.

Reginald tried to second her, and sometimes succeeded, but Laura observed a peculiar tone of repression, of indifference, perceptible, she thought, through his amiable, ready acquiescence in all his wife's projects and suggestions. It seemed to her that he was enduring something with as good a face as he could.

'I must say it is rather hard lines to be carried off to a German Bad a week before the twelfth,' said Colonel Bligh. 'Why, you missed the Pierslynn partridges last year!'

'Oh, I shall come in for the grouse and pheasants,' returned Reginald, 'and reap the reward of my conjugal devotion, eh, Winnie?'

'You ought indeed; it is too bad to drag him away,' said Winnie, with a loving smile. 'But I do not think Reginald dislikes the idea of Germany, or rather Austria.'

'I have long ago resigned myself to my fate,' remarked Reginald, with a slight laugh, yet with a sound as of reality in his voice, 'and I try to get

as much enjoyment out of life as my circumstances permit.'

'Hear him!' cried Colonel Bligh. 'His circumstances, indeed! the luckiest dog in Great Britain!'

'When do you think you will return?' asked Laura.

'Oh, when the spirit moves us,' returned Winnie evasively; 'and when we come back I expect you to pay us a long, long visit at Pierslynn. We can give you a studio, and you can paint lots of pictures before the Academy opens. Can't she, Reginald?'

'Of course she can,' said Reginald wearily.

Laura wished them good-bye early, and went with the young mother to look at her sleeping baby.

'He is looking well, and greatly grown,' said Laura, looking earnestly at the boy; 'a very different creature from the shadowy infant he was when I first saw him.'

'Yes, thank God! Do you know, the little darling holds out his arms to me now. I sometimes wish there was nothing to take me from him; but I enjoy going out, and being seen too. Ah! Laura, if I am but safe from one fear, life will be only too delicious. Do you see how ready Reginald is to forego the shooting rather than return to Pierslynn? Trust me, all will go well.'

'God grant it, dear! When do you start tomorrow?'

'Oh, some time in the afternoon. We sleep at Dover, and take the Ostend and Brussels route.'

'Good-bye, dear Winnie; write often.'

* * * * *

This last interview comforted Laura greatly. If Reginald's heart was true and steadfast to his wife, he might retrieve and atone for the past. She was glad he was gone away safely for some months; when they returned, she would have a confidential explanation with him, and so arrange matters that her rights should be acknowledged and Reginald's reputation saved.

'After all,' she thought, with a slight natural sigh, 'it would be a divided kingdom only for a lifetime. I shall never marry, and after my death Reginald's son shall have his own again,' so for the present she put aside painful thoughts and doubts, and determined to enjoy the rest and change which her visit to the seaside promised.

The village of C——, although within five or six hours of London, had as yet escaped the overwhelming tide of autumnal cockneys. Its sea-bathing qualifications were only known to the neighbouring gentry and farmers, with a sprinkling of artists whose visits did not vulgarize the picturesque seclusion of the place.

Denzil's friend, an ex-sea captain, had married a C—— girl who inherited a small farm and cottage. This formed a delightful retreat to the tired mariner, who had added considerably to the quaint residence, and generally improved its surroundings, until it became the boast of the village, and the

captain's house was considered a type of all that was luxurious.

The days previous to their departure were a trial, mental and physical, to Mrs. Crewe, and through her to Laura. The anxious discussions as to what ornaments were to be left and what put away, the sudden recollection that it would be better to have kept out something which unfortunately was already packed at the bottom of the largest box, the long exordiums and injunctions to Collins, the terrible uncertainty whether Topsy was to be taken or not, the impossibility of starting by a mixed train at 11.30, and being at home to give up the house at half-past five, these were a few of the difficulties which exercised Mrs. Crewe's mind. But all finally arranged themselves. Topsy, it was decided, would be happier in her own home, with Collins, who promised and vowed to watch over the beloved animal, to sustain her with mutton and occasional fish, and to comfort her with a bed of hay renewed every week. Denzil promised to receive his friends, and advised a clean sweep of all decorative articles, as the expected inmates were bound on an errand which did not incline them to regard trifles.

'It is a downright mercy that the Admiral went away to his brother's. What we should have done with *him* in the house I can't think; not that *he* would grumble, dear good man; but the idea of having things topsy-turvy when he is with you seems in a way—sacrilegious.'

So said Mrs. Crewe when they had fairly started from Paddington, and waved their last adieux to Denzil, who stood looking after them on the platform.

The Dingle, as Mrs. Crewe's temporary abode was called, was a most tempting retreat seen, as Laura saw it, for the first time on a fine summer's evening. It stood a little way west of the village in the opening of a dell or dingle which ran inland from the sea, sheltered by the high grounds at each side; some oaks and chestnuts gave shade and beauty to the little plot, half garden, half pleasure-ground, which intervened between the partly thatched cottage and a low wall or embankment separating it from the stretch of sandy beach which spread from one dark reef and mass of shingles to the other.

At high tide the water touched the embankment, and when it ebbed, left a wide margin of shining gold in the sunshine. The garden was sweet with roses, syringa, and heliotrope; great bushes of fuchsias and laurestinus testified to the balmy mildness of the air, while on the western slope of the brae behind the house, where the fruit and vegetables caught the fructifying rays of the morning sun, lay a delightful kitchen garden.

The road from Northport, the nearest town, ceased at the gate, which was at the junction of the grounds with the beach, and as the travellers reached it, a rosy-cheeked, countrified, but neat servant-maid came running from the house to set wide the portal,

bobbing courtesies as she held the gate, and then collected the unavoidable small parcels from the omnibus conductor with evident hearty goodwill.

The tea and stroll in the garden which followed were very delightful and invigorating. Mrs. Crewe was loud in her praise of the air and scenery.

'Really this charming place will make me ten years younger,' she said to Laura. 'I am quite impatient for Saturday, that Denzil may enjoy something of this invigorating air; it will do him a world of good, for I do not think he has been looking at all well lately. Have you observed it?'

'I cannot say I have,' said Laura, who was gathering some flowers, and not especially heeding Mrs. Crewe.

'Perhaps not,' returned that lady severely. 'You have been so much occupied with *Mr.* and Mrs. Piers, that I am not surprised you overlook my poor boy, who, I must say, never forgets anything in which he can oblige *you*.'

'Indeed he does not,' said Laura, with a frank, sweet smile. 'You must not be cross with me because I answered you carelessly. You know quite well that I am nearly as impatient for his coming as you are.'

'Well, well, I believe so,' returned Mrs. Crewe; 'and though I say it, you ought, Laura, for the pains and trouble he takes about you, is—is—quite remarkable.'

'I am most grateful to him, I assure you,' said Laura, resuming her flower-gathering undisturbed,

well aware that Mrs. Crewe's weak point was her adored son, and the observance due to him.

In spite of this slight breeze, they watched together, in restored harmony, the glories of a beautiful sunset, and retired to rest delighted with the happy chance which gave them so sweet a resting-place for their brief holiday.

* * * * *

Time fled swiftly at the Dingle. Laura was away out with pencil or brush before the morning dew had breathed its last under the sun's kisses. It was a time of purest enjoyment to her; she steeped herself in the fresh beauty of the scenery, and learned endless colour lessons in the inexhaustible studio of nature.

On all sides she found material for pictures—the fishing boats, with their load of gold and silver—'treasures of the deep;' the brown nets hung out to dry against the blue of sky and sea; the cows standing luxuriously knee-deep in the pool, into which the burn that flowed through the dingle widened in one place; the little sturdy urchins, in queer old-fashioned garments and 'clouted shoon,' trudging home from school, their slates hung round their necks, and books under their arms, with happily a bright blue frock or pair of vivid red stockings to lighten up their figures; the great placid farm horses, with shaggy fetlocks and flowing manes; the patches of pine and oak-wood which lurked in sheltered hollows. Above all, the never-ending variety of the sea: its lights and shadows; the

coast-line, the cliffs, graceful if not bold, the long sweep of glittering yellow sands. It was a continual feast of beauty, enough, when accompanied by the balmy, health-giving air, to account for the delicious, tranquil happiness which seemed to radiate from her heart.

Could she have hoped six months ago, when, still bruised and aching from the cruel blows of fate, she sought rest and found none, that she should so soon taste contentment deep and pure? Even six short weeks ago, when those terrible letters of Holden's reached her, and she felt for a while stunned, her faith wrecked, her hold on all things relaxed, how little she anticipated this after-glow! Did she forget too quickly? Had her nature grown shallower? Were the inner depths of her heart silted up with the gritty sands of disappointment? Even her tender conscience answered 'No.' The tree of life had put forth fresh leaves for her; hope beamed anew. Somehow, even Reginald's shameful conduct had ceased to humiliate her, as the knowledge of it did at first. He had erred, but while time still existed it was never too late to mend; and she hoped so to manage that Winnie should never know his baseness.

* * * * *

Saturday, on which day Denzil was expected, came quickly, and Mrs. Crewe was early afoot to make elaborate preparations for the expected guest's breakfast, dinner, and supper, as it was market-day.

Laura, taking a small sketch-book and a large basket, accompanied her into the village, and to the little pier where the fish-wives spread out their spoils.

'Denzil is fond of fish; let us get him some nice mackerel for tea. Fried mackerel split open, with just a small lump of butter in the middle, is one of the nicest things for tea; and there are some good plums; he is sure to like plums.'

'Yes, Mrs. Crewe; he is very fond of fruit and vegetables.'

'Sailors always are, my dear; and no matter what splendid things they get in other climes, they always enjoy the humbler productions of their dear native land. How much are your eggs a dozen, my good woman?—one and twopence? Monstrous! I could not think of giving such a price. Say tenpence, and I will take two dozen.' (*Aside*) 'Hens are not laying well just now, Laura, and we had better lay in some,' etc., etc.

The day passed in the pleasant occupation of making all things ready for the favoured guest. The little parlour they occupied—not liking to use the best drawing-room—was sweet and pretty, with flowers carefully arranged by Laura; the tea-table was set forth by Mrs. Crewe's own hands. The cosiest of garden-seats was placed under a spreading oak tree, the largest in the neighbourhood, and all things were in the highest state of preparation by six o'clock. But no Denzil made his appearance.

Mrs. Crewe was half crying with vexation and disappointment.

'What can have happened, Laura? for something must have happened, I am sure. It is so unlike him to be late in any way.'

'No, I do not think anything has,' said Laura, rising to look for and examine the Great Western time-table. 'I fancy he did not like to start as early as we did, and lose a whole day. Here there is a train that leaves at 5.40; express to Darlsford reaches at 8.30; then there is a slow train that reaches Northport at 10.20; depend upon it, he will be here by half-past eleven.'

'I hope so; I am sure it is a mercy I had nothing hot for tea—it would be utterly ruined. Thank you, Laura dear; you always have your wits about you.'

The hours wore on; Laura took a book and retreated to the garden; Mrs. Crewe went to look at the poultry, and enjoyed a long gossip with Mercy, the neat little servant. In truth, this was a favourite amusement of Mrs. Crewe's, and the amount of information she thus acquired respecting the histories of the surrounding families was more remarkable than useful.

At length Mercy was sent to bed, and after a careful inspection of the kitchen fire, Mrs. Crewe also took a book, and very soon fell asleep over it.

Laura read so long as the light lasted, and then sat thinking or dreaming till the night air felt chill, and she went indoors to find a shawl; then, seeing

that Mrs. Crewe was asleep, she closed one window gently to save her from the draught, stepped out upon the lawn again, and strolled down to the beach wall. The tide was in, and lapping gently against the stones, and a young moon was silvering a long line across the bay, over part of which the shadow of the western cliffs lay softly. Laura stood long, listening to the murmur of the sea, drinking in the briny odour of the waves, and lulled by the sweet influence of the hour into a half-unconscious condition of reverie.

Suddenly a distant sound struck her ear. She listened. It was the sound of wheels and horses' feet, which drew rapidly louder and nearer, and then stopped at the gate.

'I am afraid they will all be in bed,' said a voice she recognised.

'No, no, sir; they bain't. I sees a light. Thank you, sir. Shall I carry in your traps?'

'No, thank you; I can take them in myself.'

Another good-night, and the gate opened to admit Denzil.

'I am so glad you are come!' exclaimed Laura, advancing to meet him as he stepped out into the moonlight. 'We expected you about six or seven, and Mrs. Crewe was quite uneasy.'

'Laura!' he dropped the small valise he held on the grass, and took her outstretched hand in both his own with more than usual cordiality. 'It is delightful to find you here with a kind welcome.'

Laura felt for an instant startled by his warmth, and the next vexed with herself for noticing it.

'How is my mother?' was Denzil's next question.

'Oh, so well; and looking so well! She was tired waiting for you, and has fallen asleep. She will be delighted to see you,' said Laura, turning towards the house.

'Wait a moment,' returned Denzil. 'It is such a heavenly night, let us go round by the beach wall; I like to have a look at my old friend the sea. This is glorious! Doesn't it seem to lift one clean out of the common cares and mean things of life?'

'It does, indeed; as if there was a soul in inanimate nature that was casting some spell upon you —as if she tried to explain herself to you.'

Denzil did not reply, and they walked together to the place where Laura had been standing when she heard the sound of Denzil's conveyance.

'And you are pleased with the place? You are happy here?' said Denzil, suddenly breaking the silence, and turning to look at her.

'Perfectly pleased; quite happy,' she returned. 'Very thankful, I assure you, for the opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with nature in all, or any, of her moods; though as yet we have only had sunshine.'

'I wish you were never to have anything else,' said Denzil kindly, and there was a pause. 'Yes, this is a delightful resting-place for a wayworn mariner,' he resumed. 'I remember visiting my

friend Ritson when he first came here, some seven years ago. I thought it charming then; but even by this light I can see he has made great improvements. It has always been a dream of mine to have a leafy nook to retire to when I have done enough, and made enough, to entitle me to rest.'

'You are too young to think of such a thing for years to come.'

'No doubt; but it will take all those years to make fulfilment possible; even with good chances —and I have had them—it is a task of time to create even a moderate competence.'

'And if so for you, how much more for me! Only I want so much less. But come, let us go to your mother,' and Laura again turned towards the house.

'One moment,' said Denzil, in low, quick tones; 'let me thank you for all your kind thought for my mother; all the pleasant companionship we both owe you.'

'It is but little I can give anyone,' said Laura, with simple, unaffected humility, struck by what appeared to her the uncalled-for emotion in his voice and manner. 'I owe more to Mrs. Crewe than she does to me; she has made a home for me when I should have otherwise been homeless. Let us go to her now.'

Of course there was a rapturous greeting with Mrs. Crewe, and then a pleasant, cheerful gathering round the supper-table, and some light-hearted talk before the party separated for the night.

Denzil delighted his mother by telling her that he was going to stay till Tuesday, and intended to see if he could not give both ladies a sail on Monday to some rocky islets that lay a few miles south-east from the bay.

'By the way,' he said, as his mother was leaving the room, 'I quite forgot I have a letter for you from the Admiral. It seems he has mislaid your address, and so wrote to my care.'

'I wonder at that; he is always so methodical,' said Mrs. Crewe, opening it. 'Oh, he says he will be with us on Thursday. His brother's house is full of company, and it is too much for him; he wishes for the well-ordered quiet of my house. What a dear, discriminating saint of a man he is! He shall have everything he likes here. Good-night, Denzil; be sure you put your candle out. Laura—Laura, my dear, I am coming. I have a letter from the Admiral to show you.'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE boating expedition was charming, perhaps not the less so because Mrs. Crewe declared her dread of the water would not permit her to enjoy it, and she therefore remained at home. Some rambles on the shore and along the cliffs, with a drive to a ruined castle at some miles' distance, made Denzil's visit pass but too quickly. Though he parted from his mother and Laura with cheerfulness, promising to secure a longer holiday next time, it was very lonely after his departure.

'It is not that he is a great talker,' said his mother, as she and Laura sat together under the oak tree in the evening, 'but he listens so well, and knows so much; he is so kind and well-tempered and considerate for a man! Ah! the woman he marries will be lucky.'

'Yes; he is very, very kind and pleasant and well-informed,' said Laura heartily; but added, with a spice of mischief, 'I have heard Mrs. Trent

say that marriage is an extraordinary touchstone; that men who have been dutiful sons, kind brothers, pleasant friends, sometimes turn out disagreeable, tyrannical husbands.'

'Then it must be their wives' fault. I am sure Mrs. Trent need not talk—she does as she likes with her stiff six-and-eight-pence of a husband! I do not think much of *that* Mrs. Trent. It is rather extraordinary, considering the terms you and I are on, that she never asked me to her house!—as if the widow of an officer in the Royal Navy was not more than the equal of the best professional man in London!'

'Well, dear Mrs. Crewe, she never asked *me* to dinner save once or twice, and that was with the Admiral; yet I know she likes me—she is always pleased to have me at luncheon, which seems to be the repast specially suited to the entertainment of poor relations, and I like best to go then. I have her to myself; she is always so bright and pleasant; and Mr. Trent, though far from uncivil, evidently considers it a hopeless loss of time to waste words upon so insignificant a personage; yet I am sure he would do me a service if he could.'

'And pray why are you sure?' asked Mrs. Crewe, with some severity; and Laura making no immediate answer, the conversation turned into other channels.

The Admiral arrived on the appointed day.

Both Mrs. Crewe and Laura were struck by the

haggard, worn look of his kind handsome face. True, he had had a long tiresome journey, having come across the country by many changes of trains from his brother's place in Worcestershire. He was evidently glad to rest in the cool quiet room prepared for him, and said little or nothing that evening. But he soon recovered, and seemed to enjoy his quiet room, the simple beauty of his surroundings, the soft fresh air.

The Admiral was fond of an early walk with Laura to the beach or the pier, to see the fishing-boats come in, or to watch the children hunting for periwinkles, while he talked gently and kindly to the fishermen, who soon recognised him to be at least 'a noble captain;' and so they used to come back slowly, with leisurely enjoyment of the sights and sounds, the beauty and the freshness around them, to the cottage, and to their letters, which were not delivered at the Dingle till noon. So time went on so softly, so evenly, that the dwellers in this pleasant 'sleepy hollow' could not feel the rapidity of its ceaseless flow, and were conscious of a vague surprise when Sunday came round.

One afternoon, on her return from an unusually long ramble with her guardian, Laura, to her great joy, found a letter awaiting her from Winifrid, dated from Dresden. They had at the last moment altered their route, as she had persuaded dear Reginald to let her revisit the scene of so much plea

sure and sorrow, and to take a look at her father's grave.

'I cannot tell you, dear Laura,' the letter went on, 'how present you are to me in our old haunts; I listen for your voice, and I think of all your goodness to me, and what a wayward imp I was! The dear father's grave is well cared for—our good old landlord has seen to it. All the people we know have been so pleased to see me—even the Hausfrau, with whom, you remember, I used sometimes to quarrel.'

Then followed a glowing account of how well baby had borne the journey and behaved; of how she feared Reginald was a little bored, as he did not care much for picture-galleries and things of that kind; that they were going on the next day to visit Prague, and thence to Franzensbad, where she begged her dearest Laura to address her reply. Finally, the words, 'Be at rest about me; I think all is well, and I am happy!' filled the cup of Laura's content to the brim; she let herself taste to the full the quiet enjoyment of the hour, and left the future to take care of itself.

Denzil was not able to revisit the Dingle till the middle of the following week. Then he arrived looking pale and tired enough, yet bright and animated.

His friend Captain Ritson was, he said, in great spirits; the operation on his little girl's eyes had been happily accomplished, and they hoped in another month to be able to bring her back to

her seaside home. They were quite satisfied with Collins.

'Then they are easily pleased,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'Does the house look clean? and have you any idea if she makes the dustmen call regularly?'

Denzil answered the first query in the affirmative, but acknowledged his ignorance as to the other.

'And my precious Topsy? I trust that dear cat is not neglected?'

'Far from it; she is an immense favourite, and sits for hours in Mary Ritson's lap. I am afraid Topsy is faithless.'

'That I am sure she is not,' said Mrs. Crewe stoutly; 'some allowance must be made for peculiarities of nature.'

Laura felt an unusual degree of pleasure in the return of her kind sympathetic friend, and showed it with sisterly frankness. After the 'high-tea,' which was their evening meal, the little party strolled out upon the lawn to watch the receding tide and the last gleams of a fine sunset. The Admiral fell into conversation with Mrs. Crewe on the subject of moon-blindness, which he had often seen among sailors—*à propos* of the operation which Denzil had mentioned.

The latter was walking apart, smoking his cigar, when Laura came from the house with a shawl she had sought for Mrs. Crewe. After wrapping it round her she turned away, and said, with the familiarity that had grown greatly between them of late:

'Denzil,'—he threw away his cigar and joined her at once—'I have ventured on a very audacious project since you were here. I was cogitating it then, but I have quite made up my mind since.'

'And what may that be?'

'There is a lovely little nook round that spur of rock behind the Dingle, with a glimpse of blue sea to the right, and a tangled mass of brambles and wild leaves over the lower rocks, with just two larch trees, behind which at sunset the light comes in the most marvellous way. It has taken hold of my imagination. I feel as if I must and could paint it; and, do not laugh, but I think, if I can at all work it up to my idea, I shall try to get it into the Royal Academy.'

'Laugh! I shall not laugh,' said Denzil, directing his steps and hers to the low wall which formed a terrace over the beach. 'Try, by all means; even if you do not succeed, it will be an incentive to work, and no great harm done.'

'Yes, but I want very much to succeed. You must come and see the place and my sketch, my idea of representing it, and help me with your advice.'

'The best I can give is at your service; but I am afraid it will not be worth much.'

'Oh, it is worth something. It would be such a grand thing for me to have a picture exhibited; fancy what importance it would give me in the eyes of that little Jew man who ordered the copy I am to finish when I go back. I do not think he would venture to call me "my dear" any more!'

'The deuce he does!' cried Denzil. 'The insolent beggar!'

'Oh, he does not mean to be insolent,' said Laura. 'It is a sort of official manner; the more he "dears" you, the more he beats you down.'

'I don't like the notion of your selling things to these fellows. It is a shame you should be obliged to go to them.'

'It is not like you to talk in that way; if you are to live by work, you cannot pick and choose your patrons and purchasers. Why, I felt as if I loved that little Jew when he said, "You do me a good faithful copy of S———'s 'Brigg in a breeze,' my dear, and I'll give you seven pounds." You would have been edified to hear how I stood up for myself, and haggled and squabbled until I got an advance of ten shillings.'

Denzil laughed.

'I cannot fancy you haggling; that is more in my mother's line. She is the most generous soul in the world, and yet she dearly loves a bargain.'

'Oh! I am growing quite hardened. I remember when it was agony to me to name a price, not so very long ago. But I am much stronger in every way than I was.'

'I think you are—much stronger and better in every way,' he returned, looking straight at her with kindly thoughtful eyes, as if he rejoiced in the new life that was visible in her whole face and expression, in her colour and carriage.

Laura flushed with a sudden consciousness of

the sorrow and mortification of which he was thinking; was it possible he had suspected her of still grieving over the wreck he had witnessed? She had more than once thought she perceived that he judged her harshly, imagining that she had not conquered her feelings for Reginald. How little he knew!—but while she thought thus Denzil was speaking again.

'We must have a consultation over the picture to-morrow,' he said; 'and when that is over, I—I want some advice from you, or rather your help in making a decision.'

'I am sure I shall be very glad to talk over any of your affairs; but I am afraid I cannot be much help to you.'

'Yes, you can,' returned Denzil decidedly; and there was a long pause, during which they both gazed at the rippled stream of light stretching out across the bay, and listened to the soft murmur of the receding tide.

'Do you know anything of Mr. Piers's whereabouts at present?' said Denzil, suddenly speaking out of his thoughts.

'I think they must be at Prague just now, but I am not sure. I am to write to Franzensbad, on or after the fifteenth.'

'Do they make a long stay?'

'Winnie mentions no plans.'

The weather for the first two days after Denzil's arrival was rainy and overcast, but a brief thunder-

storm cleared the atmosphere, and the third morning was all a painter could desire. Laura therefore determined to begin her great undertaking, and made all due preparation in the forenoon, Denzil having undertaken to accompany the Admiral in his morning walk.

At dinner Mrs. Crewe announced that it was her intention to visit a deserving and bedridden old woman (under the Admiral's guidance), and take her some tea and sugar, as the want of those necessaries and inability to read the Bible were her two principal deprivations.

'The amount of spiritual light bestowed upon some of these poor ignorant souls is truly marvellous, and it would be a sin and a shame to let a woman of that kind faint for want of a cup of tea,' observed Mrs. Crewe. 'What are you going to do, Laura?'

'Oh, I shall spend the afternoon sketching in the cove. Perhaps you will look in there and see how I am getting on.'

'With pleasure, my love. Denzil, what are your plans?'

'I shall be resolutely idle, and enjoy myself. I had a long swim this morning while you and Laura were gathering gooseberries, or cutting cabbages, and I feel I am entitled to rest.'

'But you are going to advise me,' cried Laura.

'I do not forget; it will not be fatiguing.'

As soon as the sun had got round a little to the west, Laura gathered her materials together and

started for her favourite spot. Denzil, who was lounging under a tree on the lawn, came forward directly she issued from the open door and relieved her of part of her load, walking beside her rather silently while she talked freely.

'One of the many advantages of my cove is that two paths lead to it—one over the hill at the back, as we are going now, and one along the beach when the tide is out; we can return that way.'

'I know the place. I used to ramble all about here when I was staying with Ritson, five or six years ago. It is a place to make one forget the hurry and fret of life. I should like such a haven when I am a little older.'

'A little older, Denzil! When you are an old man of threescore years and ten, if you will; it would be shirking work to shrink from the burden and heat of the day before.'

'But suppose I were a man of fortune?'

'Even so, I think you would work, and I am sure you would.'

'I am not sure,' said he, smiling; 'I believe I am really a lazy fellow, only circumstances have been a powerful whip. By the way, I always fancied that cousin of yours, Reginald Piers, would have gone in for public life.'

'I thought so too. I suppose he finds life too pleasant for such serious labour. You cannot think what a sweet lovely place Pierslynn is, large enough for dignity and beauty, but not too large for homeliness and comfort.'

Denzil stole a sharp quick glance at her; as she spoke her countenance wore an expression of quiet restful content; not the slightest trace of what might be construed into envy or regret was to be seen there, and Denzil's own brow cleared as he looked.

'I think,' he resumed, 'that young Piers had one ingredient that would push him into public life—that is, vanity.'

'You think Reginald vain? I never observed it.'

'I confess I do not view him favourably; still, he can be pleasant, and I dare say open-handed, though I believe self is his ruling motive—not a narrow ill-natured selfishness that worries over trifles, but a deep principle that never relinquishes a strong desire, cost what it may.'

'You are a little harsh; but I begin to think I never quite knew Reginald, or rather that circumstances have greatly changed him;' she sighed slightly, and they walked on in silence for some way.

When Denzil spoke again, it was on a fresh topic; and they proceeded, with occasional silences and pleasant desultory talk, till they reached the spot from which Laura had taken her sketch.

Then there was the business of opening the colour-box and arranging the folding easel, the fixing of the artist so as to catch the exact points which she had sketched in previously.

'You see,' said Laura, 'if I can only get enough

of the blue misty distance there to the left out to sea, then the brambles and heather and mossy rocks, and those two lovely larch trees with the light behind their upper branches, it would make a pretty picture. "Oh, wad some power the giftie gie" me to make the dumb trees and sea and stones speak to the world as they speak to me; if I could put the pensive tenderness and repose they express on canvas, I would indeed be happy! but that requires genius, and I fear I have not enough for such a consummation.'

'I do not know,' returned Denzil, thoughtfully and candidly; 'I am not sure that I have the power to recognise it if you had—at all events, it is no common gift to understand what nature tells us, without speech or language. Still, you have got in these stones and the tint of the heather very well; your distance might be more distant—don't you think these rocks, with a fringe of foam round them, brought in in the middle distance, would make the background farther off?'

A long interesting discussion ensued, and then Laura set to work diligently, while Denzil lay down on the soft, short mossy grass at a little distance, and watched her in silence, just answering her occasional observations shortly, as if he were enjoying the *dolce far niente* too utterly to talk.

Some time passed, and then he rose, strolled slowly away to where the little wavelets came lapping the beach softly, caressingly, and stood there in thought for some minutes; then returning, stood

near Laura for a while, making an occasional remark on her work.

'Don't you think you might rest now?' he said at length.

'But I am not tired.'

'Have you forgotten that you are to give me—well, to help me to decide a matter of importance, at least to myself? I waited patiently till you were free to hear me.'

'Oh yes; I am quite ready,' laying her palette carefully aside. 'I think I have done pretty well this morning. In another half-hour the sky behind the trees will be much richer. Well?' looking up at Denzil, who had sat down on the piece of rock beside her, and, leaning his elbow on his knee, rested his cheek on his hand.

He did not speak for a moment, and then said rather slowly:

'You perhaps remember my telling you, some weeks ago, that I might possibly go to Japan? The mail is nearly due on the arrival of which I shall probably have to decide.'

'Yes, I remember,' returned Laura, feeling suddenly chilled and shocked at being confronted with this painful possibility. 'I am sure, both for your mother and myself, I hope you will not go.'

Denzil plucked a handful of heather, pulled it to pieces hastily, and flung it from him; then turned to Laura, and looking straight and steadily at her, said:

'That depends upon you.'

'On me!' said Laura, genuinely surprised. 'How so?'

'Are you then still so much engrossed by another that you cannot understand why my future is at your disposal?' cried Denzil impatiently. 'How is it you do not understand, you do not feel, that I love you, even though you may be indifferent to me? Tell me, how shall I decide respecting the appointment I expect? Will you be my wife—and give me an object to work for, even if I leave you for a while to make my position more worthy of you?—or will you take the hope from me?—for, perhaps against probability, I *have* hoped.'

Laura sat silent, bewildered, looking back with the swift glance of memory at many an incident which she now felt ought to have shown her that Denzil was more than a friend, yet half incredulous.

'I do not seem able to believe it,' she said slowly, and without embarrassment. 'We have been so tranquilly happy together, you have done me so much good, is it not a pity to change such a friendship for—for a more unquiet feeling?'

'But,' returned Denzil, his strong kindly face lighting up with an expression she had never seen in Reginald's, 'suppose feeling gives you no choice? I did not *choose* to fall in love with you; but, living with you, knowing you in bitter trial, in the brave silent struggle against heavy odds, in the strength and tenderness of your everyday life, who could help loving you as I do, with my whole heart?' He took her hand as he spoke, and bent his head

till his brow rested upon it, a gesture so loving and reverent that Laura could scarce keep back her tears; while his words seemed to rend away some cloud or curtain that had hidden the depths of her own soul, and she perceived how necessary he had grown.

'But, Denzil,' gently drawing away her hand, 'are you quite sure of yourself, quite certain that your friendly interest, the absence of other women—you go so little into society—have not misled you? I am half afraid of——' She paused.

He smiled.

'I am very certain of myself; it is of *you* I want to make sure. Tell me how I stand with you, now that you know my true feelings. Can you love me? Will you be my wife? I know I have little to offer of this world's goods now, but I have my foot on the ladder, and you are not the woman to shrink from beginning humbly with the man you love—*if* you will love me, Laura?'

Laura covered up her face in her hands, unable to master the emotion which brought quick tears to her eyes.

'I am afraid to believe, afraid to trust. Ah, Denzil! I have suffered so much, and I have passed through it all into such rest and contentment, that I fear to come out of the soft grey shadows of my life even into sunshine.'

'Dearest,' said Denzil, drawing nearer to her, 'there is very little brilliancy in the existence I want you to share; there is very little change in

our relationship either, only we shall draw closer to one another, and I shall know that you are all my own; that which we have called friendship will but deepen into a more absorbing attachment. I am not often presumptuous, Laura, but I think, I believe—I could make you happy in the quiet home-like way that suits you.'

'Are you indeed so earnest?' said Laura, impressed by the depth and seriousness of his tone 'Is it possible that you imagine me really necessary to you?'

'You are! I do not say that if you reject me I should never strive or hope or recover myself again —I trust there is stuff enough in me to bear up even under so heavy a blow—*but*——' a short expressive pause—'my life would be better and happier with you than it ever can be without you. Listen to me, Laura. When all was going fair and well, when I first met you, I liked you; but, as I dare say you saw, I was tremendously taken with Winnie Fielden—Mrs. Piers. She was the loveliest girl I had ever met, and so bright and pleasant; however, I soon saw that although he kept it very quiet, Piers was as far—ay, farther—gone than myself about her; I saw there were rocks ahead for all of you, and yet it was out of my power to prevent the mischief. The day that Winifrid spoke to me about her wish to go to Germany, I was sure of what I suspected before—that she recognised your cousin's feeling for her, and feared for herself. Then, when the mysterious quarrel rose between you and your

fiancé, I guessed you had come to a knowledge of the truth, and I felt for you heartily. I watched you with the deepest interest, and I understood the fortitude, the faithfulness of a nature that could keep so brave a front as you did. Then I went away; I was glad to go, glad not to be vexed with the presence of a girl I could have loved well had she cared for me; but in my lonely hours at sea I thought oftenest of *you*. Your cousin's marriage did not surprise me, I knew what the end would be. When I came back I was delighted to find you with my mother. You made her house a real home to me; you were the most interesting companion I had ever had. Your true unaltered affection for your cousin, your supplanter!—the quiet harmony of your life, all were unutterably restful to me; I felt soon that nothing the world could give me would be complete without you—and—speak to me, Laura! I have at times horrible pangs of jealousy when I think that Reginald Piers is still perhaps a rival, or rather the man you thought he was. It makes me savage to think you ever cared for him. If that is all past and gone, might I not be your faithful companion for the rest of our journey?'

'I am greatly startled,' she said slowly; 'I never dreamed that you cared for me in *this* way. It is sweet to be loved, and I scarce know how the knowledge of your affection will affect me. I confess I do not like to think of your going away; my life will be very dull without you—and if indeed I can make you happy, if you are sure you

will be satisfied with so poor and insignificant a partner as myself——'

She stopped abruptly, her cheek growing pale, her heart beating painfully, overcome with the mixture of pain, pleasure, remembrance, fear—astonishment that she was on the point of accepting Denzil Crewe.

But he again caught her hand and tenderly kissed it.

'Do not hesitate,' he said; 'you see how dear you are to me. You have known me intimately, and surely know that I am at all events honest and true; and if hearty love and warmest sympathy can make a woman happy, you will have both. I have spoken abruptly, but it could not be otherwise; you could not understand that I loved you till I told you so. Now let me feel that I have a sure anchor—that I may go away, with the blessed hope of finding you when I come home ready to share all the best I can gather together for you.'

Laura did not speak for a moment, but she left her hand in his, and he watched her with earnest, eager eyes.

'I think,' she said at length, with a sweet hesitation, 'that after all we ought to make each other happy, for if sympathy and understanding cannot make us mutually helpful, I know not what can.'

'You will then promise to be my wife when I return to England—that is, within a year from this day?' said Denzil, still holding her hand and looking at her with all his soul in his eyes.

Laura thought yet for a moment; then, raising her eyes to his with a frankness too serious to be shy, said, softly but distinctly:

'I will.'

Denzil again kissed the hand he held, and pressed it to his heart.

'Laura,' he exclaimed, and there was a tone of deep controlled emotion in his voice that thrilled her strangely, 'you give me new life, new energy!'

Neither spoke for a few minutes; both hearts were full; the light of a new, a solemn happiness hushed them, as the stillness of earliest dawn is most profound just before the first songs of greeting burst forth from wood and field.

Then Laura rose, with soft downcast eyes and a changed expression, as if the rising consciousness of secure happiness shone through the outer shell of her humanity, and imbued it with beauty 'that was all from within.'

'I cannot paint any more—to-day, at least,' she said, and began to collect her painting materials together with trembling hands.

'No; but you can stay a while longer,' said Denzil, coming to help her; I have so much to say. I may find the expected letters which will oblige me to start for Yokohama within a fortnight on my return. Accounts received, since I last spoke to you of this project, show the necessity of examining into the state of things.'

And he proceeded to speak fully of his own plans and prospects; of his hope of an honourable and

profitable career; of his regret at the necessity of leaving his now affianced wife for such a length of time (he could not hope to return before twelve months), but his determination to do so because of the advantages to be reaped from his expatriation. Laura felt almost dizzy with the sudden change that a few words had wrought in her life: almost unable to believe that she was calmly discussing a future to be passed with Denzil, who a few hours ago was but a new friend. How wonderfully at home with him she felt! how quietly happy! How every word of his displayed an honest, resolute, kindly nature!

'And how pleased my mother will be,' were the concluding words of one sentence.

'Do you really think so?' said Laura, a little uneasily. 'I know she is fond of me, and kind to me; but she scarcely things anyone good enough to be your wife.'

'If she be not pleased, she is not the woman I take her for.'

'I hope I am not unworthy to be the wife of a good man,' said Laura, with gentle dignity. 'But a mother might well be excused if she objected to my want of all worldly recommendations.'

'My mother knows too well what you can and will be to her son, not to welcome you with open arms. *How* wide she will open them!' added Denzil, a happy laugh flashing over his brown face, showing his strong white teeth, and sparkling in his large hazel eyes. 'Must we go, Laura? It cannot

be six o'clock yet!—yes, it is. Come then, before we leave this gate of heaven, give me one kiss, the seal of our betrothal!'

He drew her to him, holding her with a close embrace to his breast, pressing his lips to hers with clinging warmth; then Laura knew his was a lover's kiss, and that she had never felt one before.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next day was still young, when Denzil broke the news of his engagement to his mother, without any preamble. Laura had gone to look for a book the Admiral wanted, and on her return to the sitting-room, where Mrs. Crewe was busy over the week's accounts, Denzil advanced, and taking her hand, exclaimed:

'Mother, Laura and I have a secret to tell you.'

'I do not think you have,' she returned, shutting her account-book with a slap, and coming up to Laura, she opened wide her arms. 'I am far too experienced a woman of the world not to see how matters were tending. My love,' folding her in a huge embrace, 'I receive you as a dear daughter, for I am sure you will make my precious boy happy, and that is more than rank or riches to me. I rejoice on your account too, dear Laura; for I *will* say you are a lucky girl to have won such a heart, such a disposition, as my Denzil's.'

'Mother!' he exclaimed, in a tone of remonstrance.

'Do not interrupt, Denzil—I say no more than I have right to; you might, I am sure, have chosen whom you liked; but I think you have chosen wisely. God bless you, my dear children; may you be happy in each other!'

And bending down her head on Laura's shoulder, Mrs. Crewe shed a few tears; finally, she embraced her son, and sat down declaring that now she felt her task in life was done, as her dear boy had found a suitable partner.

'How will the Admiral take it?' were her next words, with a slight accent of doubt and a look towards her son.

'He has already taken it well and kindly,' said Denzil. 'I thought it right to ask his consent before speaking to Laura; I feared he might not think me a good enough match for his ward, but——'

'My dear Denzil! *I* consider you a match for anyone,' interrupted his mother.

'Others may not take quite your view of the matter,' he said, with a smile. 'However, I am happy to say he accepted me most kindly, provided I found favour in Laura's eyes; and even did me the honour to express his satisfaction in committing her to my care.'

'So well he might,' said Mrs. Crewe emphatically.

All this time Laura had not spoken, and had contented herself with returning her intended

mother-in-law's embrace warmly; she now said softly:

'Dear Mrs. Crewe, I will try to be a good true daughter to you.'

To which that lady replied, 'I am quite sure you will, my dear. And now I shall go and talk to the Admiral. I dare say you two are wishing me further.'

'Indeed, indeed we do not!' from Laura.

Mrs. Crewe went on, not heeding her, 'As it is market-day, I will take Mercy with me into the village, and get something nice for dinner in honour of this joyful occasion. I believe there are pheasants to be had sometimes at the general shop—poached, no doubt, but we need know nothing of that; and perhaps a brill, if the boats are in.'

'But, my dear mother, I have something more to tell you,' interrupted Denzil, 'which may not please you so much, though it is good news too;' and he proceeded to inform her of the proposal of his firm to despatch him to Japan, to bring matters there into order, and examine into the suspected malpractices of their agent, and of the various advantages he anticipated would spring therefrom.

At first Mrs. Crewe was irreconcilable, and even shed a few tears; but she gradually came round to her son's representations, that a year and three or six months would be the extreme limit of their separation, and then he would really settle down into a stay-at-home 'landlubber' for the rest of his life.

'So you said before, Denzil,' she exclaimed, 'so

you said before, and now you are off again to the other side of the world. What does Laura say to your scheme?'

'That Denzil knows best,' she said. 'Yet I wish he had not to go.'

'It *is* for the best,' he said gravely, 'and the sooner the better; for every hour of delay will make our parting more painful.'

'When do you expect to know for certain the time you must leave?'

'My week's holiday will end on Monday; I expect to find the letters which will decide everything on Tuesday at the office. I must have a week to prepare, and hope to start with the mail after next —that is, in about a fortnight.'

'So soon?' cried his mother, while Laura silently pressed the hand that held hers, and the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the Admiral, who gave his cordial assent to the proceedings, and plans and prospects were discussed with friendly frankness.

The few days that intervened before Denzil left them made themselves wings, and fled away with surprising speed. There was an indescribable mellow sweetness in the sober joy that pervaded them: a certainty in the lasting happiness of love so tender and considerate, so gradually matured into fullest development. In those days Denzil seemed to have suddenly grown one with her—to be friend, brother, lover, all, and more than all.

How could she have ever even imagined happiness without him?

Then came a telegram from London:

'Letters as expected. Must sail on 27th. Will be with you on Thursday.'

This was followed all too quickly by a sudden hasty parting, which seemed to cost the mother more grief and tears than the *fiancée*, who was deeply touched and gratified by the strong feeling betrayed by Denzil in bidding her farewell.

The first few days after Denzil's departure seemed terribly desolate, dreary, and never-ending; but the week over, both Mrs. Crewe and Laura felt that the first notch in the tally of coming time was surmounted, and though a trifle, was so much deducted from the total.

Finally, the last letter sent ashore with the pilot reached them, and they felt really cut off from the wanderer.

Laura sought solace in earnest work; Mrs. Crewe was too used to these separations not to bear this one with resignation, while the bright future beyond supplied her with an endless source of conjecture and anticipatory arrangement.

She settled where Denzil was to live, the amount of rent he ought to pay, the servants they were to keep, and the parties they were to give. So the hours slipped by, and Time, the healer, brought beauty and hope into their lives.

The time came quickly, too, when they must quit their sweet summer retreat.

Just before she was to leave the Dingle for Leamington Road, Laura had a long letter from Winifrid, dated a week previously from Franzensbad.

It was written in high spirits. All was well with her and hers. Lady Jervois and Sir Gilbert were with them; 'it was such a comfort to have dear Helen with her, particularly as Sir Gilbert was now obliged to have a proper attendant, and did not object to his wife joining in expeditions which cost him nothing. The walks and drives were lovely; the company most amusing; the band excellent; dear baby blooming; and above all, Reginald was about to be rewarded for his goodness in giving up the partridges at Pierslynn, for a Graf with many consonants in his name had invited him to his place near Kaliez, in Prussian Poland, where there were forests and game of every kind; so he (Reginald) would take advantage of the presence at Franzensbad of his sister and her husband to leave Winnie in their care. On his return they would bend their steps homeward, travelling by easy stages, and probably would reach London towards the end of October.'

This letter gave Laura sincere pleasure, and extracts from it formed a large item in the epistle she was compiling in time for the next mail, in order that Denzil should have home news as soon as possible after his arrival at his destination.

After all, it was cheerful, now that the grey autumnal days drew in so early, to return to the comfortable London home.

Mrs. Crewe was very busy indeed for some time, regulating and replacing everything in its original order.

'Do you know, Laura, I do not think Mrs. Ritson has been judicious in her treatment of Collins,' she would say during her many pauses for rest and conversation, when she would enter and sit down in the dining-room, duster in hand. 'I had to call her three times just now before she came, and then she said she did not hear because she had turned on the water-tap, which is nonsense, and impertinent; I must really put her in her place again. I doubt, too, if she was as kind to Topsy as she pretends. Mrs. Ritson was greatly taken with the dear cat; but I suspect she did not owe much to Collins. I never saw anything like the delight of the darling beauty when she first saw me; the way she purred and rubbed her head against me was positively touching,' etc.

So they settled down into their old system of life.

Laura soon found plenty of work, and watched with pride and pleasure the growth of a certain little hoard kept with jealous care. Somehow or other, whether it was that an assured future gave cheerful firmness to her manners, or settled happiness a bolder turn to thought and touch, success seemed to come at her call; so she waited patiently,

though not without a certain dread, for the return of Reginald and his wife to London.

The Admiral, for some unexplained reason, was less occupied with the Christian Brethren and Mount Moriah than formerly. Mrs. Crewe accounted for this by supposing that the dear Admiral's natural good sense and knowledge of the higher class of society had at length surmounted his acquired fanaticism. Laura expressed no opinion, but suspected that her guardian was in some mysterious way short of funds; she was therefore doubly grateful to the Providence that had so shaped her course that she was now very nearly, if not quite, self-sustaining.

Herbert Fielden, who was working, as arranged by his brother, in an office previous to going out to join him in Bombay, was a frequent visitor during the months he was in London, and Laura was surprised and pleased to find him companionable and not without observation.

They sometimes took a walk together of a fine Sunday, when he used to talk very confidentially. He had not forgotten his strong liking for Denzil, and their conversation often turned upon him; but, in accordance with her own and Denzil's wish, Mrs. Crewe had agreed to keep their engagement a secret until his return from Japan. Nevertheless, the boy's *penchant* gave an interest to their intercourse, and drew them together.

Herbert also in his confidential talk frequently let fall crumbs of information touching Madame

Moscynska which surprised and disturbed his hearer. The fair Pole was a great favourite with the unsophisticated boy.

'Doesn't she ride and play cards! I can tell you she is more than a match for any of the men at Pierslynn. She was awfully kind to me—indeed, I think she took rather a fancy to me—and taught me no end of games. She is a tremendous politician, too, always plotting against Russia. Mrs. Piers is very fond of her; she was in great hopes of converting her to Protestantism this summer, only she was obliged to go abroad so suddenly.'

'Has she gone abroad?' cried Laura. 'Where?'

'I don't know. There was some plot on foot in Germany, I think, so she went to help it. She is an extraordinary woman.'

This conversation took place at the end of October, and about a fortnight after, Herbert came in to tell his friends at Leamington Road that he had received an urgent summons from his brother, who had found a berth for him in the house of a friend, and to consult with the Admiral as to the preparations requisite for his start, money matters, etc.

Laura could see that the inability to contribute his share to Herbert's outfit was a keen mortification to the Admiral.

'I feel most severely that I trusted too much to my own strength, and rejected competent advice, when I embarked in that unfortunate Hungarian

undertaking. Having assumed the place of guardian to you and your young cousins in a parental sense, I should have been more cautious; indeed, mere mortal foresight is exceedingly imperfect, and the strange perversions of the human heart are not to be fathomed; still, to live in a constant state of doubt and suspicion is to neutralize all power of doing good.'

He sighed deeply, and gazed away towards the window with the painful perplexed look that always touched Laura.

'Dearest guardian, if you would only think more of yourself, your own wants and rights, you would be better and happier; the only living thing you are hard to is yourself. As for us, we are all well provided for now; do not trouble any more about us; it will now be our duty and happiness to take care of you.'

'Ay! how differently matters are arranged for us, compared with our own designs. But I feel at rest as concerns you, dear Laura, and believe your lot, if humble, will be a happy one. Winnie's is a more brilliant and a more trying position. I trust she knows where to find strength. Have you heard from her lately?'

'Not for more than a month. I suppose she is on her way home. I expect her next letter will say when we may expect to see her.'

The Admiral so far opened his heart to Laura after Herbert had left them, the evening that his immediate departure for India had been decided on.

As is sometimes the case after speculating about a letter, it arrives—the next morning brought a brief epistle from Winnie, dated from Vienna.

From it Laura gathered that a previous letter must have gone astray, as, after some account of the baby, whom she did not think quite so well as he had been at Franzensbad, she went on :

'I am weary waiting for a letter from you ; you know there is no one on earth I rely on like yourself. If you cease to care for me, what is left? and you may judge from my last how happy I have been since poor Helen left! Sir Gilbert is really wonderfully better—is it not strange how disagreeable, unnecessary people are spared, and sympathetic, kind ones, like the dear father, are swept away? To think that it is little more than two years and a half since we were left desolate at Dresden! I seem to have lived through two lives!'

After a slight sketch of what she had seen in Vienna, she wrote :

'I find my German very useful; some of the "Grandes Dames" whose husbands Reginald met in his hunting expeditions at Kaliez, have called. They are amiable and civil, and delighted that I can speak with them in their own tongue. But I do not interest myself much in anything. I long to be back in England, and shall not soon leave it again. Baby must be a true English boy. I have

no idea when we shall start on our homeward way—not for a week or ten days. Reginald is well amused, and has many Austrian friends. He has asked half the "curled darlings" of the Turf set here to Pierslynn for Christmas.

'Imagine how surprised and pleased we were to meet Colonel Bligh, the other day, in the Prater. He seemed like an old friend; he has been with us every day since, and is really quite a comfort to me. Write to me at once, dearest Laura, that I may have your letter before I leave.'

This communication made Laura profoundly uneasy. Something had gone wrong; and all she could hope was that she should soon see the writer and have the satisfaction of a thoroughly confidential talk.

Meantime, she was very busy helping Herbert with his outfit and preparations, in which she received much assistance from Mrs. Crewe. She felt deeply parting with the bright good-humoured boy, whose youthful selfishness at least never wounded. He was one more link severed of the chain which bound her to the past. In another month a change still greater would probably take place—when she had revealed her knowledge to Reginald; then, indeed, 'all things would become new.'

CHAPTER X.

HERBERT had gone. The dull and shortening days of November were gliding fast away. Laura's working hours were unavoidably restricted; yet the number of her pupils increased, and, but for her uneasiness respecting Winnie, and the dread with which she anticipated her *dénouement* with Reginald, the sombre season would have been very happy, with peace in the present and hope in the future.

As it was, nothing could long cloud the lasting joy with which she looked forward to her union with Denzil, and she proved a most willing and sympathetic listener to Mrs. Crewe's various and rambling recollections of her son's childhood, youth, and adolescence.

Meanwhile Winnie did not write, and the only news Laura received of her was from the dowager Mrs. Piers, who came up to town for a few days' shopping, and called upon Laura. She said her

son and his wife had left Vienna and intended to return by Munich and Nuremberg to Paris, where they would probably make a short stay; that Winnie was a very bad correspondent, and that she (Mrs. Piers) feared her daughter-in-law was subject to nervous attacks, similar to what had almost cost her her life last spring.

'I am sure there could not be a more amiable, easily pleased creature than young Mrs. Piers, during the months she passed in my house,' said Mrs. Crewe, who assisted in a stately manner at this interview. She had an unavowed antipathy to Mrs. Piers, and rather enjoyed contradicting her. 'Perfectly reasonable and unselfish; and I must say it is not every man who has Mr. Piers's luck, and can pick up a pearl as soon as he throws away a diamond.'

'Really, dear Mrs. Crewe, you are quite poetical,' said Mrs. Piers, taking refuge in lofty coldness against this masked battery. 'Pray, Laura, do you know if Mrs. Trent is in town?'

'She was not when I called there about ten days ago, but was expected this week, I think.'

'I should like to have seen her before I leave. I am going to Westmoreland the day after to-morrow. Poor Sir Gilbert is far from well; he has fallen back a good deal since they left Franzensbad. Helen is very anxious I should go to her.'

'Very natural,' said Mrs. Crewe, with an air of approbation that irritated Mrs. Piers. 'There can be no comforter in trouble like a mother.'

'Of course,' returned Mrs. Piers. 'Pray, Laura, how is your excellent guardian?'

Laura made a suitable reply, and then asked the date of Winnie's last letter to her mother-in-law.

'Oh, I have not heard from her since just after Helen left them; then she wrote a rather hasty, imprudent letter. But I am no mischief-maker, and I never intend to say a word about it to Reginald—poor fellow! he has his troubles, fair though his lot may seem. God forbid I should increase his irritation.'

Laura's heart beat high at these words. She longed to ask Mrs. Piers boldly if the letter touched on Madame Moscynska; but the dread of Mrs. Crewe's eager curiosity and endless comments held her back. She could not expose this spot upon Winnie's bright seeming of prosperity and success to the uncompromising investigation of such eyes as her future mother-in-law's.

'You surprise me,' she said quietly. 'Winnie used to be the best-tempered and least exacting of mortals, and always seemed to appreciate you sincerely. At this distance one cannot understand how things really are, or what misunderstandings may exist. I cannot believe that she wrote hastily to you without at least thinking she had good cause.'

'You are very loyal, Laura. I cannot enter into particulars now; but you would be surprised if I did. At any rate, I shall be as well pleased to be in the North when they pass through London.

Indeed, I am very anxious about Sir Gilbert, and though his estate, being entailed, must go to that cousin of his, Captain Howard Jervois, there will be large savings for Sybil, and one never knows how so crotchety a man may dispose of them. He has made about four wills already, and may make four more. The Jervois' jointure is miserably insufficient; but most men think women can live upon air.'

'Exactly so,' remarked Mrs. Crewe, who was burning to know what *embrouillement* lay hidden under Mrs. Piers's mysterious hint. 'There is no better test of a man's principles and sense of justice than the way in which he disposes of his property.'

'No doubt,' returned Mrs. Piers, rising. 'I really must go,' as if they were making violent efforts to keep her. 'I have a hundred-and-one things to do before dinner. And you do not think there is any use in my going to call on the Trents? Good-morning, Mrs. Crewe; good-morning, Laura; my best regards to the Admiral,' etc., etc.

'Well, Laura, you may say what you like,' said Mrs. Crewe, with much decision, as that young lady returned from seeing Mrs. Piers to the door; 'but I consider it a downright misfortune to have such a mother-in-law. She is a disagreeable, conceited, cross-grained cat, and Winnie deserved a better fate than to fall into such hands. She will just make mischief between husband and wife. Tell me, my dear, what do you think she was driving at

about the "hasty letter"? I hope Winnie gave it to her properly, for she has a spirit of her own. And to hear her speculating on her son-in-law's will before the breath is out of his body—it is really shocking! What do you think she meant, Laura? —I mean about the letter?'

'I cannot imagine: some trifle, I dare say. But I really thought Winnie was on very good terms with Mrs. Piers; she always seemed very nice towards her. I do not suppose there is much the matter.'

'I am not so sure,' said Mrs. Crewe, with a profound air. 'We all know that from small beginnings noble structures rise—I do not mean that exactly, but you know what I mean. Ah, my dear Laura, I am glad to think that you will have a very different mother-in-law and a very different husband, though he may not have a grand place and five thousand a year.'

'So am I, dear Mrs. Crewe,' said Laura, with a bright smile. 'Not that I believe Reginald is a bad husband—I am sure he adores Winnie; but I *shall* be glad to have a good long talk with her when she comes.'

'Ah, that shows me you do not think all is gold that glitters, in her case. I know life too well to be easily deceived. Well, well, time will show.'

Laura's uneasiness took larger and more indefinite proportions after this conversation. She feared she knew not what, yet all her forebodings

centred round the graceful image of Madame Moscynska. Where had she gone when she cut short her visit to Dairysford, and left her uncle's house without a mistress? What was the source of that mysterious allusion in Winnie's last letter, 'You may judge how happy I have been'? It would soon be three weeks since she had written, and still no reply. Every morning she came down hoping to find a foreign letter awaiting her on the breakfast-table, and every morning she was disappointed. So she tried to persuade herself that no news was good news, and that if Winnie were in grief or difficulty she would infallibly turn to her early friend.

Thus a certain degree of assurance crept over her, and she waited with renewed patience the moment that was to explain all.

One afternoon in the last week of November, Laura had reached home after a long morning's work, having two classes in different schools to attend to on that day. It was dull and cold, and snow had begun to fall before she reached home. With a pleasant sense of labour accomplished and rest earned, Laura changed her dress and removed her damp boots, intending to allow herself an hour's congenial reading of an article on Art in the 'Fortnightly,' as soon as Mrs. Crewe would allow the lamp to be lit, until which time she had her knitting, for which she required hardly any light.

The dining-room was unoccupied when she entered, save by Topsy, who was sleeping in a

favourite armchair ; a good fire glowed and gleamed in the grate, contrasting pleasantly with the gloom and slow-falling snowflakes outside. The room, though neither richly nor abundantly furnished, had an air of comfort and refinement.

'I wonder where Mrs. Crewe is,' thought Laura, as she drew a low easy chair near the fire, and looked round for her work-basket.

She had come in with a latch-key, and had not seen anyone ; she had knocked at the Admiral's door, and receiving no answer, concluded that he too was out.

'I hope he has his umbrella and *cache-nez*,' was her next reflection, as she walked to a table in the opposite corner, where she descried her basket. 'He is not nearly so strong as he was last winter.'

As she put out her hand to take her work she noticed that a small card lay beside it, and on it was printed the words, 'Colonel Courteney Bligh, Junior United Service Club.' Laura stood still for a moment or two gazing at this morsel of pasteboard, lost in conjecture. What could have induced a man of his style, habits, ideas, to call upon her? She was utterly out of his line. Nothing short of a direct commission from Winnie could have sent him so far from his usual haunts as Leamington Road.

Still holding the card, Laura took her knitting and returned to her chair. How vexed she was to have missed him! She was inclined to write him

a note, asking if he had any special commission from Winnie, and appointing a time to receive him if he had. While she mused, Mrs. Crewe came in —Mrs. Crewe in one of her best caps, and a lace fichu, her gold *châtelaine*, too, at her side, certain indications that some one or something unusual was expected.

'Oh! you have found the card, have you?' she exclaimed as she entered. 'Who is he, my dear? I never heard of *him* before.'

'He is a friend of Reginald and Winnie's; I have met him with them. I suppose he has some message for me.'

'Collins says he is a "grand gentleman," and came up in a hansom. I had gone round to the butcher. I must really leave those people, Laura—the leg of mutton this morning was quite two ounces short weight. I just begged them to remember that I have scales in my kitchen—and don't you ever be without them, my dear, when you have one. What was I saying? Oh, yes—I had just gone round to the butcher's, and when I came in I found Collins open-mouthed about this "grand gentleman," as if she did not see the most perfect of gentlemen every day of her life. It must have been about one o'clock. He was dreadfully disappointed not to find you, and asked when you would be in, and when Collins said at three she thought, he said he would call about that time, as he wished particularly to see you. So I have put myself a little to rights, as I do not think it quite

the thing for you to receive a man of that description by yourself.'

'Thank you,' said Laura mechanically, while she ran over a wide range of possibilities in her mind as to the motive of this visit. She was startled and full of a fearful looking-for of evil, and while she pondered, and Mrs. Crewe swept to and fro, putting the chimney ornaments straight, brushing up the fireplace, etc., a loud ring set Laura's heart beating; the next moment Collins opened the dining-room door, saying in an audible voice, 'The gentleman for Miss Piers, 'm,' calling forth an indignantly murmured 'Ill-mannered creature!' from Mrs. Crewe; and Colonel Bligh entered with the indescribable ease and courteous bearing, at once composed and unassuming, which mark a man of the world accustomed to associate on terms of equality with men of all grades.

A tall, well-set-up man, with a somewhat soldierly carriage, an aquiline nose, light brown short crisp hair, and long red moustaches, light eyes of no special colour, watchful and variable in expression, but looking you honestly in the face. A rough warm morning suit of incomparable fit, faultless gloves and boots, completed the figure that stood bowing before Laura.

'I am very sorry I was not at home when you called this morning, to save you the trouble of coming again,' said Laura, smiling and colouring slightly.

'It is no trouble to me,' returned Colonel Bligh,

in a wonderfully soft voice for so big a man. 'I have stayed in town to-day expressly to see you.'

'Indeed! Let me introduce you to Mrs. Crewe.'

Another deep bow, and then Colonel Bligh took the seat indicated to him, and, glancing quickly at Mrs. Crewe, said in his usual quiet tone:

'I saw our friends in Paris yesterday, and I promised Mrs. Piers to see you.'

'Ah! how is she?' cried Laura, her eyes lighting up. 'She has not written for such a long time!'

'Why, that is her complaint against *you!* I told her I thought there was a mistake somewhere.'

'She has not written to me since they left Vienna.'

'That's strange,' said Colonel Bligh, looking straight into the fire. 'Then you do not know that the little fellow, the baby, is ill.'

'I had no idea of it.'

'How extraordinary!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, who had arranged herself imposingly in an armchair. 'I assure you, Colonel Bligh, young Mrs. Piers and Laura were always like sisters. Indeed, so long as she was in my house we were like one family, and a very happy family—though I say it.'

'No doubt,' said he politely. 'I have often heard Mrs. Piers speak of her stay with you; and as to Miss Piers, it is a regular case of Orestes and Pylades, by Jove! Well, I am sorry to say the little fellow is *very* ill; I had not seen Mrs. Piers for two or three days, so yesterday I called to say good-bye. She came down and asked me to see

you, and say she had written to beg you to come to her if you could, as she was so alone. You see, a man is of little or no use in such a case. I do not think Mrs. Piers has any intimates in Paris—except, of course, Madame Moscynska.'

'Madame Moscynska!' repeated Laura, feeling stupefied with sudden sense of evil.

'Ah! Princess Moscynska,' said Mrs. Crewe, with an ineffable air. 'A very charming person.'

'Exceedingly charming,' returned Colonel Bligh, slightly elevating his eyebrows, 'but not exactly—a—sick-nurse.'

'What!' cried Laura. 'Did Winnie want me to help her with the baby?'

'So I understood; and I think she was considerably cut up that you neither wrote nor came.'

'Came! Oh, I am ready to start now! Do tell me the truth—is Winnie very, very unhappy?'

'She is of course anxious and uneasy,' returned Colonel Bligh, with another glance at Mrs. Crewe, who had risen to ring the bell.

Laura was silent, thinking 'He has more to tell me, but does not like to speak out.'

'Really, the negligence of servants is intolerable cried Mrs. Crewe; 'I must call to Collins to bring the lamp,' and she moved towards the door.

Colonel Bligh started to his feet, first to open and then to close it carefully after her; returning to the fireplace, he stood looking down into Laura's face with a keener look than she thought his face could assume, and pulling his long moustaches.

'I scarcely know the exact scope of my instructions,' he said, after an instant's pause; 'but I think I may venture to say that if you really care about your cousin, now is the time to be with her—no one ever wanted help and sympathy more! Go to her at once, if you possibly can. When you reach Paris you will see how matters are, and your sense and tact—you see I have heard a good deal of you—may put them straight, if it is still to be done.'

'I will go at once,' said Laura, pressing her hand on her heart, yet speaking with grave composure. 'But, Colonel Bligh—ask me—suggest it before Mrs. Crewe solely on account of the baby.'

He bent his head, and before he could speak again Mrs. Crewe re-entered.

'We shall have light in a moment,' she said. 'Pray sit down, Colonel Bligh; do not run away so soon—you have not told us half the news.'

'Thank you, I have just ventured to urge Miss Piers to start as soon as possible. Mrs. Piers wrote last Friday, nearly a week ago, and is almost stupefied by disappointment at receiving no answer. The child is in a very critical state, and she is alone.'

'Certainly, I am sure dear Laura will go. The Admiral can have no objection. It is shocking weather for travelling. When the dear infant is better, it will be interesting to see Paris.'

'When can you start?' asked Colonel Bligh, who seemed restless, earnest, and altogether unlike the careless, jovial man-about-town Laura took him for.

'It is nearly four o'clock,' she said, rising to look at the pendule as Collins entered with the lamp. 'There is an evening train, is there not, by Folkestone and Boulogne?'

'The tidal train leaves Charing Cross at 8.30 this evening,' returned Colonel Bligh, with suspicious readiness; 'and, allowing for stoppages, you will reach Paris about nine to-morrow morning.'

'This evening!' almost screamed Mrs. Crewe. 'It is impossible. You cannot pack up in the time; and that tiresome woman has not sent home your new winter dress; and no one to see you off, or to escort you. Excuse me, Colonel Bligh—but this dear girl is *especially* under my care. I could not let her travel alone.'

'Dear Mrs. Crewe, there is no help for it. I must go. I will start by the tidal train this evening, Colonel Bligh.'

'If you will allow me, I will be at the station to see you off, and put you in charge of the guard. There is really nothing to fear from such a journey, Mrs. Crewe. Ladies' cabins and compartments, all the way through. Examination of baggage a mere farce, especially at this season. Here is the address. Piers has put up at a private hotel not known to the general horde of English travellers—Hôtel St. R——; but I will give you full directions when we meet this evening.'

'Thank you very much.'

'But Laura, my dear, I cannot——'

'I will leave this house at seven, to ensure being

in good time,' continued Laura, laying her hand kindly, but imperatively, on Mrs. Crewe's.

'You really are a trump!' cried Colonel Bligh. 'I told her you would come, though I felt by no means sure.'

'How could she doubt me?' said Laura.

'Your silence—' began the Colonel; then interrupting himself, 'but I will not stay to prevent your preparations. You will find me waiting you at Charing Cross somewhere about 8 to 8.15.'

'Will you telegraph to Winnie that I am coming?' asked Laura.

'Telegraph?'—a moment's hesitation—'yes, yes; of course I'll telegraph. And now I will wish you good-morning. Do not be uneasy, Mrs. Crewe; I assure you there is no difficulty whatever on so much travelled a route. I would offer to escort Miss Piers myself if I thought there was.'

'I have not the slightest hesitation about travelling alone.'

'We must abide by what the Admiral says,' added Mrs. Crewe.

'Good-bye, then, for the present.'

'Good-morning, Colonel Bligh.'

'Gracious goodness, Laura!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, the instant they were alone. 'This is really a wild-goose chase. I am sure no one feels more for poor dear Winnie than I do, for I well know what it is to lose a precious infant, though I am thankful now to think they are safe from the miseries of this wicked world. But she has her

husband, and a first-rate nurse, and everything money can buy. Why she wants to race you off in the snow and cold and wretchedness of a bad November, I cannot understand—just the selfishness of prosperity. She never sends for you except when she is in trouble—never for pleasure or company.'

'Dearest Mrs. Crewe,' interrupted Laura, who had seated herself at that lady's Devonport and was scribbling rapidly, 'what money have you in the house? can you spare me three pounds?'

'Yes; I can do that much. But how do you think Denzil will like your gallivanting off in this—this wild manner? Really, Laura, you ought to consider——'

'I have no fear of Denzil's disapprobation. He would be the first to start me off. Will you kindly see to these notes being posted, and——'

'Oh yes, of course. Really, the headstrong self-will of young people is amazing—you do not pay the smallest attention to my remonstrances; you have just lost your head, Laura. And what will you travel in? Your waterproof is quite shabby, and your winter jacket a last year's concern; and to go among these grand high-flying people in your old things, shows, I think, a little want of proper spirit.'

'Dear, kind friend,' cried Laura, starting up and throwing her arms round her, 'do not contradict me; my whole heart is bent on this journey, and when I return I shall have so much to tell you.'

'Well, well,' returned Mrs. Crewe, always mollified by a hug and a kiss, 'I am a fool about you, Laura; you do what you like with me. Be sure you wrap up well. To think of your being out on the stormy sea all alone in the dark; and, as ill luck will have it, I have not a morsel of anything in the house to make sandwiches of. I will send Collins out for half a pound of ham this moment.'

Mrs. Crewe hastened in search of Collins, and thenceforward became most active in furthering Laura's preparations, albeit complaining all the time.

About five the Admiral came in, and Laura ran up to his room to explain matters. He was a good deal exercised by this sudden change of front, and, like Mrs. Crewe, raised many objections to Laura's travelling alone. But something in her ardent resolution, the controlled eagerness, the tender haste which pervaded her manner, carried him away also; and, a little past seven o'clock, she found herself ready for the road, her portmanteau packed, her travelling-bag replenished, and her purse sufficiently fortified, while Collins stood in her bonnet and shawl, as she had come from fetching a cab, at the front-door.

The Admiral had almost put on his coat to accompany his ward to the station, but she dissuaded him eagerly. Reginald's friend, Colonel Bligh, had promised to meet her and do all that was needful; the Admiral need not run the risk of taking cold while waiting for an omnibus, nor the expense of a cab to return.

She was feverishly anxious to have a few uninterrupted words with Colonel Bligh, who impressed her as knowing more than he liked to say. But at last she was off, escaped from the Admiral's last injunctions, from Mrs. Crewe's voluminous embrace.

She was not nervous or cast down, rather strung to courage and composure; she felt, in some impressive, unreasoning way, that the moment of action was close at hand, and that all uncertainty would soon be at an end. If only she could spare Winnie some suffering—if she could save Reginald's reputation!

Lost in active thought, the long drive from Westbourne Park to Charing Cross seemed quickly accomplished, and it was with a sense of comfort and protection she recognised Colonel Bligh standing among the porters at the entrance of the station.

'You are quite up to time, Miss Piers,' he exclaimed, as he handed her out and gave her luggage to an already subsidized porter. 'We will get your ticket and see the luggage weighed, then I shall have a few minutes to speak to you.'

This accomplished, he led Laura to a remote sofa in the general waiting-room.

'I am greatly relieved to see you fairly on your way to Mrs. Piers,' he said; 'she wants you terribly. By the way, I did *not* telegraph.'

'Why?' asked Laura, with an odd feeling that she knew he would not.

'Oh, well, I had my reasons. It would not

hasten your arrival, and she will perhaps be less disturbed. But tell me, do you *know* Madame Moscynska?'

'Very little.'

'Do you admire her?'

'No. I have a curious feeling of unreasonable repugnance to her.'

'Ha! Then I suppose she will not bamboozle you; and I need not be afraid to say that she is the devil's own *intrigante*. In short, I do not understand her myself. I am not strait-laced, but there are certain things I cannot swallow. You will judge for yourself, however; and—and—I say—Miss Piers, would you mind writing me a line?—to the club, you know—just to say how you find Mrs. Piers is going on. I saw a good deal of her at Vienna, and, by Jove! she is an angel! I never met a woman like her. You will not mind sending me word if the little fellow pulled through?'

'I will write to you if you wish,' returned Laura unhesitatingly; 'but I hope you will see us all soon in London.'

'So do I. I wish Piers had some friend who could just put him straight, or say a "word in season," as the parsons call it.'

'Could *you* not offer him the advice you think he needs?' said Laura, looking curiously at him.

'Who? Me? No, by Jove! I am the last person he would listen to; but——'

'Now then for the Folkestone train!' cried a porter, putting his head into the waiting-room.

'Give me your bag, Miss Piers. Will you not have a glass of sherry? Get you one in a moment; lots of time.'

Laura declined. So Colonel Bligh placed her carefully in the carriage, seeing that the foot-warmer *was* warm, that her shawls and wraps were comfortably arranged, and then held a private conference with the guard, who came to the carriage and promised most emphatically to 'look after the young lady.' Then the whistle sounded, Colonel Bligh shook Laura's hand cordially, and said, 'You will be sure to write,' stepped back and raised his hat, as the train moved out of the station at rapidly increasing speed, dashing away into darkness and the unknown future.

Busy thought, and the patience of a strong spirit, rendered the journey less tedious and fatiguing than she expected; the diminished number of passengers at that untoward season made the few difficulties of the well-worn route less difficult. At last, in the dim cold light of a drizzling morning, Laura found herself at the Gare du Nord, somewhat puzzled and stunned by the vociferations of guards, douaniers, porters, and cochers, in a tongue which, however well known grammatically, was orally unfamiliar.

CHAPTER XI.

LONDON is not so much spoiled by gloom, damp, and drizzle as Paris. To the beautiful *riant* capital of 'la belle France' sunshine is essential, and bad weather mars her loveliness, as a fit of the sulks or a burst of shrewish temper spoils the fair face of a pretty woman; whereas London, throbbing with the strong pulse of business life, sombre, mighty, loses little of its characteristics in an 'even downpour,' a shroud of fog, or a shower of sleet.

Paris had been to Laura, as it is to most vivid imaginations, the object of many a day-dream. To see that queen of cities, to wander through her galleries and museums, to visit the various scenes of the mighty drama enacted there nearly a hundred years ago, when the new era then inaugurated was brought forth in the desperate throes of more than one generation, and baptized with fire and blood, had long been a cherished desire; and here

she was, driving over the wet slippery asphalte pavement, scarcely conscious that she was in the famous city, so absorbed was she by the idea that in a few minutes more she should see Winifrid, her pupil of early days, her *protégée*, her friend, her rival, her always earnestly loved Winnie. In what plight would she find her? and how would she be received by Reginald?

The way seemed endless, and she felt faint with apprehension and excitement when the *fiacre* drew up at the entrance of an hotel near the Tuileries Gardens.

The establishment was *en papillotes* at that early hour; two *garçons* in their shirt-sleeves were sweeping the entrance-hall and stairs; a lady in a dressing-gown was looking through a huge account-book in the bureau, and a newsboy with a bundle of papers under his arm was talking to a stout man of imposing appearance who had not yet found time to shave. This last personage approached the *fiacre* as it stopped opposite the entrance, and in answer to Laura's questions replied, 'Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Piers and suite were in the house; but they were not yet visible—indeed, he feared Mrs. Piers could not see anyone. A great misfortune had just happened; the poor little baby died the night before last, and madame was inconsolable.'

'The baby dead!' cried Laura, overpowered by this news. 'This is terrible! Tell Farrar, tell Mrs. Piers's maid that I am here, and let me have a room as near Mrs. Piers as possible.'

She gave the head-waiter, as this personage proved to be, a card with which she had provided herself.

'Ah! *Mees* Piers,' said the man, reading her name. 'Oh! pardon, mademoiselle! *Par ici*—this way, mademoiselle;' and he led her up more than one flight of stairs to a rather dingy but well fur-furnished bedroom. 'I will call the *femme de chambre*, and have a fire lit. What will mademoiselle take for breakfast?'

'Thank you. I must see Farrar before anything.'

'I will send for her at once; she is not yet up.'

While he went away Laura removed her hat and cloak, and gazed with tear-dimmed eyes at the *femme de chambre* lighting up the fire.

The poor dear little baby dead! The tender life but scarce begun, so soon cut short! What a blow to Winifrid! Surely such a grief would draw Reginald closer to the bereaved young mother! She waited with infinite impatience until the lady's-maid should make her appearance, and noted in a vague, half-unconscious way the foreign look of the room and its furniture—the heavy velvet-covered sofa and fauteuils, the lace curtains hung close against the glass of the windows, the tall vases and pendule on the mantelshelf, which almost obscured the looking-glass—the stiff, uninhabited aspect of the apartment. All sense of personal strangeness and isolation were swallowed up in her profound compassion for Winnie.

At last the door opened to admit the maid.

'Oh, Farrar!' cried Laura, running to her and taking her hand.

Then she stopped, and could not bring out another word.

'Indeed, Miss Piers, I *am* glad you have come; my poor dear mistress did so watch for you. Ah, she is quite broken-hearted! She just sat like a statue all yesterday; we could hardly get the dead baby out of her arms. I persuaded her to go to bed last night after Mr. Piers left her. Now she is sleeping at last, and I must not wake her; but it *will* be a comfort to her to find you here.'

'Oh no, do not disturb her. I am so terribly grieved for her and the poor dear little baby.'

'And he had grown such a fine fellow! such a beauty! Ah, Miss Piers, it is not for me to speak, but we have been all wrong since that—that Madame Moscynska turned up at Franzensbad. I never could abide her; and nurse, she thinks no one ever was so grand and good, and what not; but she is rather an ignorant woman, is nurse. You must have some breakfast, ma'am. I ought to have thought of it before, after such a journey, too!'

'I do not feel as if I could eat; but get me a cup of coffee and a morsel of bread while I wait.'

'Yes, ma'am, I will see to it. Oh, how I wish you had been with my poor mistress when baby began to get bad!'

'There was some mistake about the letter,'

began Laura; but a sudden fit of caution seized her, and she stopped, some unaccountable divination suggested silence as to Colonel Bligh's intervention.

'Then you did not get it in time?' said Farrar, pausing at the door, with a somewhat anxious look in her face.

'No, or I should have been here before.'

'That is odd,' said Farrar, and left the room.

While making a hasty toilette, drinking her coffee, and striving to swallow a mouthful or two, Laura thought intensely. She felt instinctively there was a delicate and difficult task before her; that she must be firm and cautious, but fearless. Farrar's words suggested mischief, all the more threatening for its vagueness.

But Farrar soon returned.

'Yes, 'm!' she cried, 'Mrs. Piers is awake, and is just all of a tremble with pleasure at hearing you have arrived; do come, 'm!'

Laura started up, and the next moment crossed the threshold of her cousin's room.

Winnie stood in the middle of it, wrapped in a long dressing-gown of white cashmere and lace, her abundant nut-brown hair all disordered and hanging loose, deadly pale, her large blue eyes dilated with a strange strained, almost stern look, inexpressibly painful to Laura, who, by one of those curious fantasies of memory, was carried back by Winnie's dress and attitude to a morning years past, when she was the sunny darling, the

spoilt pet of the house, the wilful, generous, whimsical, tender dictator of the family—she had come to show her first dressing-gown to her mother, and, to prove that it was not too long, had drawn herself up with dramatic dignity. The contrast of the 'now' and 'then' was too painful; Laura's heart swelled with unspeakable compassion.

'Winnie, dear, dear Winnie!' was all she could say, as she threw her arms round her.

Winifrid was very still; she slowly raised her hands and clasped them round Laura's neck, resting her head on her shoulder.

'You could not come before?' she said, with a deep sigh.

Glancing round to assure herself that they were alone, Laura exclaimed:

'I never had your letter, Winnie—never knew anything of your sore trouble till yesterday, when Colonel Bligh called. I came as quickly as I could.'

'I knew he would not fail me, nor you either.' She paused, and Laura felt her clasp tighten and her heart beat vehemently. 'What shall I do, Laura? What shall I do? I have nothing left.'

'How do you mean, dearest? Yes, of course, you feel desolate now; but in time you will gather strength. Time will bring consolation.'

'You do not know—you cannot know,' resumed the poor young mother. 'Ah, Laura, he was so sweet! he began to know me so well; and he had Reginald's eyes—the Reginald I used to love and that loved me!'

'And does love you,' said Laura, looking down anxiously into the poor dry strained eyes, feeling alarmed by her feverishness. 'Lie down again, dear Winnie, and I will watch by you. You are worn out; you scarce know what you are saying; a few hours' sleep would do you so much good.'

'Sleep! I never thought I should sleep again, but I did; I have only just woke up, and everything seems worse. I do not want to sleep, or rather, I wish I might never wake. But come and see the last of my poor little baby;' and letting Laura go, she opened a door which led into the child's room.

He lay so softly fair, in the satin-lined coffin, that but for the pallor of the still rounded cheek, he might have been in the profound sleep of infancy.

Laura's eyes welled over as she gazed at the little marble face, so happy in its expression of intense repose.

'It is my last look,' said the mother, still tearless, with a strange composed voice. 'The people will soon be here to take him away—away for ever! they take away the dead so soon here.'

'Oh, Winnie, dear Winnie!' cried Laura again, clasping her in her arms, 'it is terrible to see you like this! If our good kind mother could look upon you now, how heart-broken she would be! she loved you so much.'

Something in the allusion touched a tenderer chord than had yet been struck. Winifrid shivered

all through her frame, her bosom heaved with a mighty sob, and then the blessed tears forced their way in a thunder-shower, as she burst into an agony of weeping, trembling so violently that Laura was frightened, and half led, half supported her into her own room. Then, when the first force of this torrent of grief passed over, she persuaded her to lie down again, promising to watch over her while she slept, and ran for Farrar to assist her mistress.

When the long agony-weeping had subsided, and Laura thought the mourner had dropped off to sleep, she said softly to Farrar:

'Where is Mr. Piers?'

Winifrid turned immediately.

'He is not up yet, I think,' she said; 'he has not been well.' Then she closed her eyes, and lay quite motionless, and to all appearance sleeping, but from time to time a quivering sigh heaved her bosom; at last that too ceased, her features relaxed, and real sleep stole over her.

Laura still kept watch, very weary, and feeling sure there was much more to hear. The sort of speechless despair in Winifrid's face when she first saw her made a profound impression on her loving friend. And where was Reginald? surely it must be a very serious illness that could keep him from his wife's side at such a time! True, there was the funeral of his little son—that must have taken him away.

How would he greet her? She had an instinc-

tive presentiment he would not be pleased at her coming. But that was nothing to her; she felt her mission was to protect Winnie, to bind up whatever link was broken between the husband and wife. Thinking thus, round and round the same circle, Laura leaned back in the deep low chair by Winnie's bed, and for a time lost consciousness.

She was roused by Winnie turning restlessly and murmuring in her sleep; then she called 'Laura' sharply, and woke up suddenly completely.

'What o'clock is it, dear Laura?'

'A few minutes past eleven.'

'Ah! then he is quite gone! If I had not slept I might have had one more look at that sweet little face. But he was to have been taken away at half-past nine. Do ring for Farrar; she will tell.' A fresh burst of tears, this time gentler and quieter, interrupted her. 'Ah, Farrar!' she exclaimed, as her maid came in, 'have they taken him away?'

'Yes, ma'am, nearly an hour ago,' replied Farrar soothingly.

'Then it is indeed all over!' cried Winifrid, burying her face in the pillow, while convulsive sobs shook her frame.

Farrar brought eau de cologne and water, and bathed her temples, and tried to administer consolation of the ordinary kind. At last her mistress said hastily:

'Thank you, Farrar; you are very kind; you

may go now;' then, as she left the room, she again stretched out her hand for Laura's. 'You will stay with me,' she whispered, 'until we go back to England, at all events; you are my only friend—I lost everything when I lost my boy.'

'Your husband, dearest, is still left to you, and you must comfort him.'

'My husband—oh yes, my husband! I do not forget him,' she returned with a deep sigh, and remained long silent and motionless. Then again rousing herself, she suddenly began on a subject so far removed from the present that Laura was startled. 'Do you remember my birthday—my last birthday, at the dear old Rectory? How we had luncheon in the woods, and my mother gave all the school-children tea in the servants'-hall? Poor mother! it was the last birthday she was with me. Herbert slipped into the mere, and Reginald pulled him out. I do not seem to have any clear recollection of Reginald before that day, although I know he used to be with us every summer. But *that* day I thought him so disagreeable; he teased so much about my importance, and seemed to mock at our little *fête;* and twice he sent me off, as I considered, rudely, because he was talking gravely to *you.* Do you remember it all, Laura?'

'Yes; how well I remember it!' said Laura, her eyes filling with tears.

'And now——' began Winifrid, then paused expressively, resuming in a strange rambling way her reminiscences of her girlish days, every now and

her breaking off to describe the charm and pro-
ness of her poor lost baby, Laura answering in
monosyllables or by a silent caress, and beginning
to be faint and weary. At length Farrar made
his appearance bearing a tray with some food and
wine for his mistress.

"Mrs. Piers has not tasted anything since early
yesterday morning when Mr. Piers insisted on her
swallowing some wine and biscuit. Do try and
persuade her to eat a bit, ma'am; and you must
be quite exhausted yourself. Luncheon—break-
fast is there all ready. Miss
Piers must have some refreshment, mustn't she,
ma'am?"

"Yes, yes; I am so selfish in my grief; I did
not think of you and the long journey you hav
taken for me, dear, dear Laura. Go and eat;
I will try, too.
Well, then; I agree to go on that co

[illegible] show Miss Piers the *salle à manger*
[illegible] so sweet to see my poor lady sh
[illegible] Farrar, who was a somewh
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[illegible] The bell

big chair, if you want anything; for I must go back to my poor mistress, and stay by her; she is not fit to be left alone.'

'Do so, Farrar. When will Mr. Piers be back?'

'He will not be long now, ma'am.'

As soon as she was gone, Laura sat down and tried to eat. She had scarcely made her way through the wing of a chicken, always listening for Reginald, when a door which led into the *salon* opened very gently, and Madame Moscynska, in outdoor dress, walked quietly into the room, with the air of being at home.

The door was opposite Laura as she sat at table, and before the Polish Princess could veil her countenance in polite blankness, Laura caught a quickly controlled flash of angry surprise in her pale face and peculiar eyes.

Madame Moscynska was the first to speak, as she advanced to the table and rested her hand on the back of a chair.

'Miss Piers! I had no idea you had arrived! How glad I am to see you! What a comfort you will be to that sweet, suffering, bereaved young mother! She had almost despaired of you.'

'I fear she had,' said Laura, rising courteously, but feeling on guard at all points.

'Do not let me disturb you,' said Madame Moscynska softly. 'Indeed, I will join you; I promised to be with Mrs. Piers during the last agony, when the poor little baby was taken away, and to receive the sorrowing father when he returned from

the funeral, so he will expect to find me. Mrs. Piers was sleeping when I came, and continues to sleep, I am glad to hear. I suppose the letter to you was delayed, or went astray?' and Madame Moscynska drew over a mayonnaise and helped herself.

'I suppose so,' returned Laura guardedly; 'but the moment I knew my cousin wished for me, I set out.'

'I always said you would,' said Madame Moscynska, with a soft approving smile; 'only the delay puzzled us.' She paused, and her lips parted again as if to speak, but she closed them resolutely; it would not do to ask point-blank how the intelligence reached her interlocutor. 'Poor dear Mrs. Piers—the dowager, I mean—she will be dreadfully grieved when she gets my letter—I wrote yesterday, at Mr. Piers's request; she was quite wrapped up in her little grandson. You must be very tired after your rapid journey—at night, too.'

Laura said she did begin to feel a little weary, looking, while she spoke, with a dim, wondering sense of distrust, yet of admiration, at the elegant figure and interesting, though rather inscrutable, face opposite to her, comparing her own ordinary travelling-dress and almost homely aspect to the *recherché* elegance of Madame Moscynska's winter costume, and wondering if this gentle, courteous woman could be the unprincipled *intrigante* Winnie believed. But as she looked and thought, the doubt resolved itself into certainty. Yes, there was a

something undefinable and repellant in the covert watchfulness of those sleepy eyes, in the hardness of the well-cut mouth, when not curved into the sweetness of her conventional smile. Was it possible that she was taking advantage of this terrible time, when Winnie, prostrated with grief, was incapable of resistance, to force herself into an appearance of intimacy?

'I must be cautious,' thought Laura, 'and not commit myself on either hand. Winifrid will speak to me ere long.'

'I must see if Mrs. Piers still sleeps,' she said at length, taking advantage of a pause in the easy flow of Madame Moscynska's talk, as she gave a sketch of the baby's illness and death, in which, without asserting anything, she conveyed the idea of having been the stay and comforter of both parents; 'and if she does, I must take that opportunity to make my toilet, a matter of necessity after a night journey. Shall I tell Mrs. Piers you are here?'

'No, thank you; I spoke to nurse, who had just come downstairs from having a little sleep. She was greatly exhausted by the long watch, poor woman; she loved her little nursling so much. She will let Mrs. Piers know.'

Before she could finish her sentence, the door by which Laura had entered the *salle à manger* opened hastily, noisily, and Reginald stood in the doorway, looking from one to the other with an air half surprised, half amused.

At sight of him, Laura's heart beat and her colour rose; she went forward to greet him, and he met her half-way.

'Ah, Laura! what a good soul you are to come all this way just to please Winnie! I always said you were A 1—didn't I?' with a little familiar nod to the Princess. 'This is a melancholy ending to the poor little boy,' he went on. 'Winnie is awfully cut up; still, she need not have imposed such a journey upon you! She will be going back to London in a few days, and you could have seen as much as you like of each other.'

'But you know I do not count the cost, when I can do anything for Winnie,' said Laura. 'She has no friend so near as myself. I only wish her letter had reached me in time.'

'Well, you have done her good already,' said Reginald, as he threw aside a loose overcoat, and sitting down, poured himself out a large glass of sherry. 'I have just been in to see her, and tell her that everything had been as well done as we could manage. She had a good cry, and, with all Madame Moscynska's kind care, we never could strike the source of her tears before. I do not know what we should have done without Madame la Princesse!'

'You make too much of my poor efforts,' she returned, with a curious upward look at him. 'Would it not be well to warn Miss Piers that your poor dear wife's nerves have received such a shock, she sometimes shows symptoms of mental alienation?

—very slight, and no doubt temporary, but the usual marks of "reason tottering on her throne," distrust of and aversion to her best friends, those whose society was previously most acceptable. Myself, for instance—you would scarcely believe it, she has suddenly evinced the strongest aversion to *me*.'

'This is terrible!' exclaimed Laura, with unmistakable alarm, and looking very straight at Reginald.

'Oh, you need not take fright!' he returned, in an odd, indifferent sort of manner. 'She will come round and be herself again. But, in the meantime, she will no doubt tell you awful tales; though you are such a rock of sense, Laura, you will understand how to deal with her.'

'There can be little difficulty in doing so; we both know every light and shade in her character,' said Laura, who was greatly impressed by the change in Reginald.

He was looking ill, pale, languid, with haggard eyes, a tinge of something like mockery in his pleasant smile, and a carelessness in his manner widely different from his former genial alertness. There was more of an effort than usual in his politeness to herself, and she felt keenly that she was far from a welcome guest, that there was mischief below the surface to which she had as yet no clue.

'Characters change a good deal with circumstances,' Reginald was saying while these observa-

tions suggested themselves to Laura. 'I assure you,' he continued, addressing Madame Moscynska, 'I consider Laura's friendship for my wife a sort of triumphant refutation of all that wiseacres have said about the fleeting nature of feminine attachments—they are quite devoted to each other. How much of it is due to a certain aptitude for dominating on one side, and accepting domination on the other, is beyond me to calculate.'

'That must be the result of habit,' said Madame Moscynska. 'Mrs. Piers never gave me the idea of being ready to accept domination.'

'I am, then, the dominating power in our association?' said Laura, with a grave smile. 'That is a new position for me.'

'You are much stronger than Winnie, and "behave as sich,"' said Reginald carelessly, pushing away his plate and again filling his glass. 'But now that you are here, Laura, it will be very nice for her to have your company on her journey back. She was quite wild to go to England before the poor baby was taken ill. It has been all deucedly unfortunate; the loss of the little fellow has half turned her head—indeed, I am awfully cut up myself! Still, it will not do for me to sit down and weep.'

'I cannot stay long, as you know,' said Laura, startled by the possibilities shadowed forth in this speech; 'and when she has *you* she can hardly want me.'

'I know, I know,' said Reginald impatiently

'But I have an engagement to visit a famous racing establishment near Presburg, where I have a chance of picking up some wonderful additions to the Pierslynn stud; so there is no use in my going over to England merely to come back again. I can do Winnie no good, and when we meet she will be better, and more inclined to attend to her husband than to nurse her grief.'

Laura had opened her lips to make an indignant reply, feeling alarmed and hurt by the tone of this speech, when a glimpse of a curious look in Madame Moscynska's eyes, as though she was watching for what would come next, made her pause and say simply:

'I am always glad to be of use to Winnie—or to you—and, as she is awake, I will go to her now.'

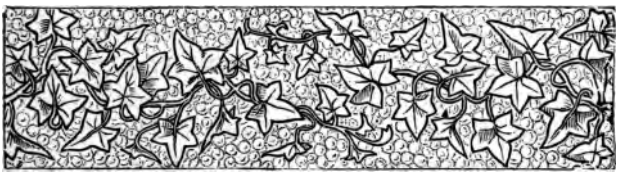
She rose and left the room as she spoke, but closing the door hastily, caught her dress in it. Opening it to free herself, the words 'surprised' from Madame Moscynska and 'infernal nuisance' from Reginald caught her ear.

Was *she* the infernal nuisance? that was little matter. This intention to let Winnie return to England alone was a symptom of estrangement that thoroughly alarmed her; so did Madame Moscynska's subtle hint respecting temporary alienation of mind, one of those poison-drops which might work incalculable evil.

Laura thrilled for a moment with the idea that even she herself might have been put on a wrong

scent had it not been for Winnie's revelations in London. Now she was forearmed, and resolved not to let Reginald leave his wife without some attempt to open his eyes to the selfish indifference of his conduct.

'How changed he is! how ill he looks!' she thought, as she paused at Winifrid's door. 'Things are not as they should be; but I must be cautious, and wait till Winnie speaks before I attempt to interfere.'



CHAPTER XII.

IT was the third day after the poor little baby had been laid in its last resting-place, and the mother's first vehement grief had settled down into deep silent sadness.

Laura had vainly attempted to interest her in various subjects, and urged her at least to write to her mother-in-law, from whom she had received a long tearful letter, full of affectionate sympathy. Winifrid rejected all suggestions, and entreated Laura to write to Mrs. Piers for her.

'I cannot; yet I do not like her to be neglected, and I am sure Reginald will not write.'

'Why?'

'Because he never does anything he can possibly help, except to amuse himself, and yet he is not happy; I am sometimes grieved for him. What has changed him, Laura? I often sit and wonder, when I am alone.'

'But *is* he so changed, Winnie?'

'Can you not see that he is? He only dined with us once since you came; he cannot bear to be without company. To be sure, I am dull and wearisome, but that is not my fault. He used to be so full of kind consideration. I think at times that some spell has been laid upon him—that he is not quite responsible.'

'That is nonsense, Winnie dear; what do you mean?'

'I mean that I have quite given up the struggle I was so fierce and eager about when we parted, Laura. I cannot stand against that woman's influence. I suppose there is something wanting in myself, some power of sympathy, of companionship; I cannot find out what. Once I fancied I was everything to him; I end by being nothing.'

'Are you not morbid and worn out with grief, dear Winnie, to fancy such things?'

'Yes, I dare say I am; but it is not just now these ideas have taken hold upon me. Only while I had my baby I had something to endure for, to keep up appearances for; I was determined to bear much, every thing save one.'

'And what was that?'

'To have the society of a bad, treacherous, relentless woman forced upon me, in order to shelter *her* reputation. She has got fast hold of Reginald, at any rate for the present. He may weary of her, or she of him, or some change may bring him back to me, and I do not say I should be hard or unforgiving. Better and more charming women

than I am, or ever will be, have been deserted before this; but we—*I* never can feel quite what I did—we shall never be quite the same to each other!'

She stopped, with a deep sigh.

'Winnie dear, this is too dreadful. "Never" is a terrible word, and you say it so quietly.'

'The quiet of exhaustion,' she returned, leaning back among the sofa-cushions with an air of unutterable weariness. 'If you only knew the fiery battle I fought at Franzensbad and Vienna! It is a relief to talk to you, Laura, you are so safe; and I do not want to abuse Reginald! He was so dear, so charming to me once! and I do not seem to have lost my affection for him, though lately it has been rudely shaken.'

She paused, looking out of her large soft eyes as if at some distant object.

'Yes, open your heart to me!' cried Laura, with a sob she could not suppress, so deeply was she touched by the hopelessness of Winifrid's voice and attitude.

'You know,' she resumed, in the same sad monotone, 'we were all well and happy at Franzensbad; that is scarcely three months ago, and it seems gone away back into bygone ages. Helen was very kind and pleasant, and Reginald was a little cross sometimes, but nothing worth mentioning. Then he went away to a hunting-party at Graf Wielizka's place; I was very glad he had some sport after having lost the Pierslynn shooting on my account.

He stayed longer than I expected, and only wrote twice. I did not mind that; he seemed enjoying himself, and I was happy with Helen. He did not return till two days after she left; then he looked ill, and was not quite like himself.

'The evening after he came back, he was talking very pleasantly, describing the shooting and the dinners, where the men evidently drank too much, and played too high afterwards, when he suddenly exclaimed:

'"By the way, our friend Madame Moscynska turned up at Schloss Wielizka; the Gräfin is her cousin, and she was a host in herself."

'I felt as if I had a sudden stab; I could not speak, and he went on:

'"Madame Wielizka is in delicate health, so she begged me to find quarters for her here, she and a little boy of hers; and the Princess with that singing fellow Bariatowski are coming here on Thursday: we must see what we can find for them tomorrow."'

'Was Reginald not aware of your objection to Madame Moscynska?' asked Laura.

'He was; but I then opened my mind fully to him. I did not go wild, as I did afterwards. I told him I could not and would not associate with this woman! I begged of him to leave the place; I promised that I would do nothing rude and create no *esclandre,* if on his part he would promise to come away within a week after she came.'

'Did he promise?' asked Laura.

'He did, laughing as if it were a silly whim of mine; provided, he said, I was still in the same mind after the arrival of so pleasant a party. Well, they came. I fulfilled my part; though as stiff and distant as possible, I did not *cut* Madame Moscynska. Then a dreadful struggle began. I could *not* induce Reginald to leave; I had almost to stay in my own room to avoid that woman. I had scenes with my husband; I found he was losing heaps of money to those dreadful men who are about Madame Moscynska. I wrote you some account of all this; but you never had the letter, it seems.

'It was a dreadful time! I never knew if I were acting wisely or not. I felt I was right, and I was perpetually being put in the wrong. At last Reginald said one morning that we should start for Vienna; but I had lost hope, I did not seem to care. However, she did not appear there, and I tried to be friendly with Reginald, and sometimes he would be nice and sometimes quite wildly gay; often I feared he drank too much, he had fallen among such dreadful people. After about three weeks we came on here, and found Madame Moscynska installed in the next street. Here her audacity knew no bounds. I implored Reginald to come home. Then suddenly it came to me that I was losing myself in such a struggle, so I gave it up; only I would not see Madame Moscynska. But when baby was ill, and I almost lost my head she came in and out. I was vaguely conscious of

her, and I am sure she gave the people in the hotel the idea of being my best friend. I wrote to you; you did not come. One day—the last day—Farrar, who has been such a good kind help all through, rushed to me, and said: "Colonel Bligh is in the *salon* alone; beg of him to go and see Miss Piers in London; I believe he is going to leave Paris." I ran to him, and had just time to say I do not know what, when Reginald came in; then I was back with baby, who soon ceased to cry or moan, and then there is a blank till I had the comfort of hearing your voice. Laura, you must stay with me!'

'I will! Winnie, dear Winnie, I think I shall be able to help you. I will venture to speak to Reginald.'

'You had better not!' said his wife despondingly. 'Nothing can do any good. The night my little darling died he was so kind and tender to me—I do not think he cared much about the baby—I hoped for a moment that he was going to be himself again; but before he left me he asked me if Madame Moscynska, who had been so good and interested in me, should get me all that was necessary? I only said, "I will not see her; do not let her come near me." And I have *not* seen her; and though I, the mother of his boy, am bowed to the earth with grief for its death, he can resent that refusal. It is this that has suddenly chilled me, and makes me doubt if there is true love in his nature; that woman has utterly mastered him. People laugh at

jealousy; they say it is mean, narrow. Perhaps it is; a jealous wife excites a sort of contemptuous pity. But is there a more desolate creature on earth than a wife left, as *I* am left, without hope, without redress? For if another woman is more charming and suitable to my husband, can he help loving her better than he does me? Only he ought not, and he *shall* not, force her upon me; that I will resist.'

She ceased to speak, and sat long in dead silence, her eyes closed, apparently asleep, except for a tremor that occasionally passed over her eyelids or her lips.

Laura was deeply moved, both by pity and indignation. She felt that she must do something, yet the interference of a third party is proverbially worse than useless; but she held a power unknown to anyone, and she would use it unflinchingly. She curbed the indignant words which rose to her lips; it would do Winnie no good to denounce her husband. How could Reginald be so cruel, so faithless? Was it that the first deliberate choice of evil so deteriorated his moral nature that he could no longer discern between right and wrong? She could not look back upon all the sorrow that had followed on his connection with her and hers, without a stirring of the pulses. She rose and walked to and fro. Winnie slowly opened her eyes, roused by the unusual motion.

'Tell me,' said Laura, pausing opposite to her, 'what is Madame Moscynska's object in risking

her character as she does? She does not give me the idea of a woman who would sacrifice much for anyone.'

'I think she likes him well enough—he is very nice, you know—and she hates *me* more than she cares for him; but, above all, she likes his money. Little things have come to my notice—too many to tell now; but I am sure he pays for quantities of things for her. She has no money, and is boundlessly extravagant. I believe, if Reginald was poor, she would leave him alone.'

'Winnie, try and put this out of your head for a little while. We must endeavour to rescue Reginald, if possible; if we cannot, you must, as you say, be patient and endure. Let us get away from Paris as soon as possible.'

Winifrid looked up with a dumb sort of surprise at the resolution and force which unconsciously expressed themselves in Laura's tone.

'The sooner the better; but I am afraid that Reginald has some scheme for returning to Austria. If he lets me go back to England without him, at such a time, it will be a slight I shall not forgive.'

'He will not think of it,' said Laura, sitting down beside her on the sofa.

Winnie turned, and, laying her head on her shoulder, heaved a long, quivering sigh.

'Let me rest here, as I used to do when I had been in punishment at home, long ago, if I do not tire you. Yes, Laura, he undoubtedly *thinks* of it. But I trust he may be kept from leaving me, be-

cause—I cannot tell you how I dread it. It would be a kind of hopeless break. I scarcely know how it would affect me. Could the day ever come that I should not wish to *see* Reginald?—to have him to myself? I am so young; life is so long!'

'Life will bring brighter days and happier anticipations,' returned Laura, with a quiet firmness of tone that gave momentary comfort to the sorrowing wife. 'There is really nothing to keep us in Paris. Come out for a drive with me to-day; it is dry, and there is no wind. You want all your strength and courage, for Reginald's sake. Ask him, this evening, to fix the day of our departure, and make all preparations. When he finds that things are in readiness, he will renounce his project of going to Austria or Hungary, if he ever seriously entertained it.'

'If,' repeated Winnie, and paused. 'At least,' she resumed, 'you will not forsake me; for you—you only—are left me.' And she burst into a long but quiet fit of weeping, after which she seemed to rally something of the courage her cousin advised; and, promising to be ready in half an hour for the proposed drive, went to her own room to bathe her aching head.

* * * * *

Laura had never felt before so heavy a sense of responsibility as now weighed upon her. The destinies of these friends, for both of whom she felt the truest interest, for one the tenderest affection, seemed thrust into her hands.

Though not without a certain reliance on herself, she trembled at the idea of acting on her own unassisted judgment in so delicate and difficult a matter. Yet the only chance of salvation for either Winnie or Reginald, lay in secrecy and rapid action.

Winnie must never know that her husband was a felon; Reginald must never be degraded in any other save her own eyes. If only she could be sure that Holden had kept his counsel! that Reginald was safe from any detection except her own! The one counsellor for whom she longed unutterably was Denzil Crewe; and even were he beside her, she could not, must not, betray Reginald to him. But it was a comfort even to think there was one in whose judgment, in whose sound, healthy, instinctive common-sense, she could have such strong reliance. When would she have the unspeakable joy of having him near her again—to speak to, to be silent with, to listen to? Near him perfect sympathy made spoken communication by no means essential. When would the dreary days of separation be ended? How sure she felt that no such cloud as darkened Winnie's life could ever come between Denzil and herself! Their affection had all the depth, fulness, and placidity which characterize a great river, the volume and force of which creates a smooth-flowing current not to be broken or rippled save by the mightiest obstacles. Looking back to her brief engagement with Reginald, she contrasted the strange unrest and excitement of

that disturbed interval with the profound trust, the delicious tranquillity, of her present feelings, the delightful anticipation of real companionship and perfect understanding when at last Denzil and herself should share the same home and help each other in everyday cares and duties.

To enjoy this highest type of love needs a certain degree of maturity. Youth is still in too sunny a ferment to allow of this clear, calm strength; something of trial, something of experience, are requisites for the rich mellowness of a love that is but a deeper, fonder friendship, touched by imagination and warmed by an under-glow of passion.

'How would Denzil take her action in so important a crisis?' Laura continued to muse. Well, she was sure; at all events, she must act on her own responsibility. He was too far away to be consulted, and all must be decided and arranged before his return.

Here she was broken in upon by Farrar, who announced that the carriage was at the door and her mistress ready.

* * * * *

The air and a change from her own rooms seemed to do Winifrid good, and Laura drew her into conversation on various subjects not connected with the absorbing topics of the present. She longed to tell her of her engagement—this was a matter that she knew would effectually draw Winnie out of herself—but she dared not. It would complicate everything, and tend to alarm Reginald. He must

not be frightened into recklessness. So she talked of the Admiral and Mrs. Crewe, of their delightful visit to the seaside, of Dick's improving prospects, and Herbert's voyage. All went well till, turning into the Rue St. Honoré, a few paces from the corner of their own street, Laura recognised Reginald entering the door of a small private hotel, which looked, nevertheless, very *recherché* and well kept.

'There is Reginald!' exclaimed Winifrid, her pale cheek flushing as she spoke. 'Do you know where he is going?'

'Where?' asked Laura mechanically, though she guessed at once.

'He is going to call on Madame Moscynska,' returned Winifrid; 'that is her hotel.'

Laura did not know how to answer.

'Let us only get him away to England,' she said at last. 'Ask him to-night after dinner. I will slip away, and you can coax him to fix the day. Believe me, all will come right. Perhaps you may be mistaken. Are you sure Madame Moscynska really means to go with him? It seems too daring.'

Winifrid only shook her head, for Laura's question brought them to the door of their hotel.

There was a bright fire and some costly flowers in the *salon*, which had evidently been arranged and put to rights in their absence, and Winifrid sat down at once in a low chair near the fire.

'It is very doubtful if Reginald will come in to

dinner. If he does, I will do my best to persuade him to come with me, and fix next Wednesday or Thursday for our start. But, Laura, I see you think I judge Madame Moscynska too hardly. Perhaps, were I in your place, I should think the same; but you do not, you cannot conceive what she is.'

'Bad enough, no doubt; yet——'

And Laura paused, a sudden idea flashing upon her.

Winifrid rang the bell.

'Do you know if monsieur dines here to-day?' she asked, when the waiter appeared.

'I do not, madame. Monsieur was here about an hour ago, with the commissionaire who brought these flowers, but he said nothing of dinner.'

'Very well! They are lovely flowers,' said Winnie, as the man left the room. 'It was nice of Reggie to send them. Perhaps he will come back to dinner,' she added wistfully.

Dinner-hour approached, however, and he did not appear; so Laura and Winifrid sat down to table without him, and had proceeded as far as dessert and coffee, when he came in, still in morning dress.

'Do not disturb yourselves,' he said pleasantly. 'I have only looked in to ask how Winnie is after her drive. But I have promised to dine with Wielizka and Latour, and one or two others, just to talk over our plans. We do not dine till eight. I think you seem the better of having gone out,'

he continued, drawing a chair to the table, and looking at his wife.

'Yes, thank you; I *am* better. What charming flowers, Reggie! the room looked quite bright when we came in.'

Reginald smiled, and poured himself out some wine.

'Where did you go?' he asked languidly.

'Into the Bois. Do you know, I feel so much stronger, that I am quite equal to start for England to-morrow! I wish, dear Reggie, you would fix the day to leave Paris.'

'You had better settle it yourself with Laura,' he returned indifferently.

'I confess I begin to be anxious to go back,' said Laura. 'You know I am not quite a free agent.'

So saying, she rose and left the husband and wife together.

There was a minute's awkward silence; and then Reginald, rising, went to the fireplace, and leaning against the mantelpiece, said:

'Well, then, when do you propose to start?'

'I leave all arrangements to you!' returned Winifrid, with a slight quiver in her voice.

'Of course I will do whatever you want in the way of preparation,' he rejoined, with careless good humour; 'but I cannot return to England for a month or two.'

'And you will let me return alone!' exclaimed Winnie, with a burst of indignation which shook

her from head to foot, but which she mastered; while her husband answered:

'Don't romance! You will have your favourite, Laura, to keep you company—Laura, whom you prefer to my friends.'

He spoke with cold composure, as if the glimpse he had caught of her emotion had roused some inimical feeling.

Winnie, conscious that every moment, every word was of importance, rose, and coming to her husband's side, passed her arm through his caressingly.

'Reggie dear,' she said, with a pathetic quiver in her voice, 'what is any company to me compared to yours? Do not let me go from you now! come with me! I fear I have been selfish in my great grief, but I will rouse myself to make your home pleasant and cheerful. Can I not be your companion, as I used to be, even though I am not a clever woman of the world?'

Reginald looked down into the sweet sad eyes so tenderly and imploringly raised to his, and his own softened as he put his arm round her and drew her close to him.

'That you certainly are not,' he said, not unkindly. 'But at least you must have learned that a man need not be the worse husband because he is not always tied to his wife's apron-string! I will not stay long—I will join you, in a month or six weeks, at Pierslynn. Why should you grudge me a little pleasure? you know how readily I gave up

the shooting, and all the fun we intended to have, to go with you to Franzensbad. If, indeed, you would care to come with us, I am sure Madame Moscynska——'

'Can you seriously propose such a thing?' interrupted Winifrid, drawing away from him in indignant amazement. 'Are you so blinded as not to see it is an insult?'

'Please yourself,' returned her husband, shrugging his shoulders. 'It is tóo bad to get so little out of life when—— but there'—interrupting himself—'do not be a fool, Winnie; you will do yourself no good by making scenes. *I* do not want to be harsh or unkind if you let me go my own way; only I do not choose to be held up as a fellow his wife can twist round her finger.'

'Are you influenced by so mean a motive?' exclaimed Winnie, yet struggling for self-control. 'Suppose *you* were weak and heart-broken, what would you think of *me* if I left you to amuse myself?'

'It is quite different,' he said impatiently. 'Besides, it is business as well as amusement that takes me to Wielizka's place. You know I have set my heart on making the Pierslynn stables renowned.'

'And I have set my heart on your returning with me, dear Reginald; you will not regret it once you are away from Paris. Ah! my husband, if you send me from you now, it will *never* be the same between us again!' and she caught his arm lovingly.

'Really, Winnie, this discussion has brought back your colour, and made you look nearly as handsome as ever. But do not waste your energies, my dear girl! I shall see you off on Wednesday or Thursday, if you like, and start on my own journey the day after.'

'With Madame Moscynska?' asked Winnie, in a low voice.

'Why not?' returned Reginald sharply, 'if she happens to be travelling in the same direction?'

Winnie stood quite still and silent: her husband looked at his watch.

'By Jove!' he said, 'I shall be late for dinner;' and he walked out of the room without another word.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAURA waited the result of Winifrid's interview with her husband in no small anxiety, although she did not greatly fear it.

Reginald might be weak, vain, inconsiderate, but it was impossible he could be really cruel to so fair and a sweet wife as Winnie! one who loved him so truly, so tenderly. Perhaps Winnie had somewhat exaggerated his misdoings and those of Madame Moscynska. Probably she was neither a good nor a prudent woman. She might have been a little spiteful and unkind towards Winifrid; but that a lady like herself, admitted into—nay, sought by what is termed 'good society,' could be absolutely, vulgarly bad in the full acceptation of the word, appeared impossible to her ordinary common-sense.

Moreover, Madame Moscynska seemed neither young nor impulsive enough to make the tremendous sacrifice that an overt *liaison* with a married

man implies. No! if Winnie only had the courage and patience to speak frankly and lovingly to her husband, all must come right. But would she have it? She was so sore at heart, her stake in the game was so heavy—her all on a throw. There was no use in thinking about it; thinking would do no good.

She stirred the fire and threw on another log of wood; then she drew the table nearer, and, taking out a letter received the day before from Mrs. Crewe, proceeded to answer it, hoping that, before she had finished, she would be able to name the date of her return. She was almost feverishly anxious to be back in London, to lay the train to the mine she longed, yet feared, to spring.

Her letter went on but slowly. She paused frequently to lean back in her chair, and to think over the plan she had carefully and painfully excogitated, and by which she hoped to avert scandal and detection from Reginald. Still Winifrid did not come; yet if their interview led to reconciliation and right understanding they would naturally take no heed of time. So Laura wrote on. It was more than an hour since she had left Reginald and his wife together, when the door opened to admit Winnie—Winnie looking unusually well, with colour in her cheeks, and new brightness in her eyes. She closed the door after her, and drew a chair to the fire.

'How nice and comfortable you look!' she said quietly. 'To whom are you writing?'

'To Mrs. Crewe,' returned Laura, feeling uneasy at this beginning.

'Poor dear Mrs. Crewe! Tell her, Laura, we shall be in London on Wednesday or Thursday at furthest.'

'I am truly glad to hear it,' cried Laura, turning her chair so as to face the speaker.

'Are you? Well, under any circumstances, I am glad to leave Paris, but Reginald does *not* come with us. I have played my last card, Laura.'

'Do not say so. In such a game as yours there is no "last card"!' exclaimed Laura eagerly. 'Do not fix any day. Wait; try again.'

'It is useless; if I delay, he will leave me here. No; I have quite resolved to start either in the morning or evening of Wednesday. Had Reginald *asked* me to stay, I should have stayed, but he did not. I want to get away to London, and then I shall be able to think quietly, and decide what to do. Ah! what can I do?' this with a burst of irrepressible despair, immediately checked. 'I suppose I shall find out in time. I shall grow stronger and wiser; and you, you will stay by me, dear——'

She stopped abruptly.

'Winifrid, dear Winnie, forgive me, but were you patient and tender?'

'I was, I think I was,' said Winifrid, and proceeded to repeat the conversation she had had with her husband, in a strange, quiet, mechanical way. 'Then he said he should be late for dinner, and

walked out of the room without a look,' she concluded.

'But is this so very final?'

'I think it is,' returned Winnie, in the same quiet monotone. 'He was not cross or unkind in manner. He does not seem to think the matter worth exciting himself about; but he will not give up Madame Moscynska, and—I can do no more.'

'Let us see what to-morrow may bring forth,' said Laura, dismayed, yet not liking to let Winnie give up hope. 'As you parted without anger, at least open reproaches, I do not despair of the effect reflection may produce on Reginald.'

'Reflection! when he is with M. Wielizka and M. Latour! there is small room for reflection with such men. But there is no use in talking, and I want all my strength. Have you any book that would interest me? I do not want even to think, if I can help it.'

'I have not, dearest Winnie. I came away too hastily to think of putting one in my bag.'

'I wish it were not so wet and cold,' said Winnie, rising and putting aside the curtains to look out, 'or we might walk or drive somewhere. I feel as if I could do anything but sit still.'

'It is nearly ten o'clock,' said Laura, infinitely distressed, yet not wishing to admit the fact of Winifrid's despair, 'and you have had unusual fatigue to-day. Suppose you go to bed, and I will find something among the railway books down-

stairs to read aloud to you, that may send you to sleep.'

'Finish your letter,' replied Winifrid; 'tell Mrs. Crewe we shall leave Paris on Wednesday; and I will look for a book myself.'

She went to the door; then, turning abruptly, came to Laura, threw her arms round her and clasped her tightly.

'How good and true you are to me! There is no one like you, no one.'

* * * * *

Laura read long, in a carefully monotonous tone, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing Winifrid's dry, strained eyes close in sleep. She sat yet awhile in deep thought beside her; and at length, after carefully arranging a night-light, and placing the bell where the sleeper could touch it on waking, she stole softly from the room, and, calling Farrar, told her her mistress was asleep. But Laura's mental work was not yet over; while she slowly undressed she revolved a scheme which needed all her courage.

She saw that it was hopeless to attack Reginald directly, but how would it do to speak to Madame Moscynska? She might not quite know all the serious mischief she was working. Even if heartless and unprincipled, she might have some regard for her reputation, and, after hearing a calm friendly explanation of the true state of affairs, she might see the wisdom at least of declining Reginald's escort.

It was a difficult and odious undertaking, but

worth trying. She felt, rather than reasoned, that if the fascinating Princess withdrew from the intended expedition, Reginald could be more successfully dealt with ; but if he deserted his wife now, the breach would be hard to heal, while any estrangement between them would terribly aggravate the impending blow. Yes, she would risk the interview with Madame Moscynska. She might be laughed at for useless interference, she might fail ; but, if she succeeded, that would repay all risks. Besides, Madame Moscynska was a woman of good standing; surely she would not peril her reputation in the teeth of a warning faithfully and temperately set before her under colour of supposing that she was not aware of the view taken by Reginald's wife of the state of things.

Madame Moscynska was a formidable personage. It was no small undertaking to stand face to face with so consummate a woman of the world, and attack her with weapons from her own armoury, to use which required trained skill, and this Laura knew she did not possess; but would not the cut and thrust of a brave and honest purpose do as well? Come what might, she would try, and that before the next day was past its prime.

* * * * *

The following morning was crisp and clear after the rain of the previous night. Winnie was calm and silent—still, as if the fever of hope was past. How to manage a couple of hours for herself alone was Laura's first difficulty.

'Have you anything for me to do this morning?' she asked her cousin.

'No, dear, nothing. What do you wish yourself?'

'Well, I should not like to leave Paris without a peep at the Louvre.'

'No; of course you ought to see the pictures; but I do not care to go. Farrar says there are some things we ought to get before we quit Paris. I will take her out with me, and perhaps take a little drive in the Bois; it did me good yesterday.'

It was therefore arranged that Mrs. Piers should not wait luncheon for her cousin, and that Laura should linger as long as she liked in the galleries.

Laura never thought she could be among pictures, and yet see so little of them as on that memorable morning; she thought over her intended visit, and planned her opening speech. Once the subject was broached to Madame Moscynska, her difficulties, at least of one description, would be over. Never was an hour and a half so long as that which distilled in leaden moments before she permitted herself to return to the hotel.

'Madame had just driven away,' the waiter said, 'and left word that she would probably not be back till late.'

'Was monsieur in the house?'

'No; monsieur was not long gone out.'

'Suppose I find him with Madame Moscynska, what shall I do?' thought Laura.

'I shall not come in now,' she said aloud to the

observant waiter; 'I can breakfast on my return;' and with a steady purpose and throbbing heart, she passed on to the unobtrusive hotel which Winnie had pointed out to her as the residence of her foe.

A courtly personage in accurate costume, with the air of an aristocratic butler, answered her inquiries.

'Yes, Madame la Princesse was at home.'

'And alone?'

'Alone? yes, quite alone.'

Laura sent up her card, and was immediately admitted to a small but most comfortably furnished room, sweet with the perfume of flowers, which were tastefully and liberally distributed on mantelpiece and consoles.

Madame Moscynska herself stood in the middle of the room, with Laura's card in her hand, and an expression of slight amused surprise on her countenance. She had apparently just risen from a table strewn with letters and dainty costly appliances for writing.

Though quite aware of the unpleasantness of the task she had undertaken, its difficulties never seemed so formidable as now that she stood face to face with the little delicate-looking, *spirituelle* woman who confronted her, in a picturesquely designed morning-gown of dark green Indian cashmere, braided with gold, a scarf of white Brussels lace draped with careful carelessness over her head, and a red camellia thrust effectively between its folds at one side.

'Miss Piers,' said the Princess slowly, 'this is a surprise, a very agreeable surprise; pray sit down, and tell me to what I owe this pleasure.'

She drew forward a chair, with a curious smile, partly polite, partly defiant, and took a seat herself at the opposite side of the fire, with her back to the light.

'I have ventured to call upon you——' began Laura, feeling that she must collapse, and pass into the conventional nothing of an ordinary visit, under the tremendous ordeal of Madame Moscynska's peculiar searching eyes, and cool unflinching gaze, unless she mentally nailed her colours to the mast and opened fire directly.

'Pray do not talk about "venturing,"' said Madame Moscynska blandly; 'is it my fault that we are not on pleasant terms of everyday intercourse? How is poor Mrs. Piers to-day? I was glad to find you persuaded her to go out.'

'I think the air and motion did her good.'

'No doubt; and you think of leaving Paris next week?'

'Even sooner, if—but it is of this I have come to speak to you, Madame Moscynska,' said Laura, gathering her forces. 'I feel it is a bold step—you may resent it; yet if I could clear away the—the sort of misunderstanding which seems to have sprung up between my cousin and yourself, I think you would forgive me.'

'You are very good,' said the fair Pole, politely and guardedly; 'I am all attention.'

'Mrs. Piers wishes to leave Paris,' began Laura, her courage coming back gradually, 'but she does not like the idea of returning without her husband. It would convey the idea—of negligence—of—in short, separation, if, after her sad bereavement, he let her go home without him.'

'Ah!' said Madame Moscynska.

'She is under the impression,' said Laura, hurrying on with the succeeding sentences, while the colour rose in her cheek, 'perhaps an incorrect one, that as *you* are returning to Presburg, or some other place in Austria, Reginald intends to travel with you, and it is of this I have come to speak. I do not think you can be aware how deeply Mrs. Piers would resent such a step. Justly or unjustly, it would seem to her the most open neglect and defiance; and if *this* is the wife's opinion, you may be sure the world will see with her eyes, and judge both Mr. Piers and yourself severely; at any rate, the English world, which is still in a measure yours.'

'What do you wish me to do?' asked Madame Moscynska coldly.

'Make Reginald understand that if he goes to Presburg he must go alone.'

'So I am a bugbear to my sweet young friend,' said Madame Moscynska, with an amused smile, which yet gave Laura a sudden sense of having made a false move. 'Really, Miss Piers, I must congratulate you on the pluck—that is the correct English term, is it not?—which emboldens you to

come to a woman of my position, and say, "You are taking my cousin's husband from her, and endangering your own reputation." You can know very little of the world.'

'I dare say,' returned Laura, with more decision than she had hitherto shown. 'But I know you are doing mischief of which perhaps you are not aware, and I give you the benefit of the doubt by telling you the truth, and trusting to your sense of right, to the womanliness of your nature, to put a stop to it.'

The Princess looked at her for an instant, and Laura met her eyes with a glance as unflinching.

'What do you think Mr. Piers will say when I give him a report of this flattering visit?'

'I cannot guess.'

'Do you think it will make him more pliant, more inclined to endure the—let us say *tristesse* of a wife perpetually drowned in tears?'

'If you choose to tell him, I have made matters worse, and I shall understand the part you intend to play.'

'You are wonderfully attached to Mrs. Piers, are you not? and yet whispers have reached me that she played a treacherous part towards you. I scarce understand such Christian charity.'

'Mrs. Piers never was anything but true, and I would dare much to secure her peace and happiness.'

Madame Moscynska looked at the carpet for a

while musingly, while a curious subtle smile stole round her mouth.

'You attribute more influence to me than I possess,' she said at length. 'I confess Mrs. Piers has roused *me*, and annoyed her husband, by her insolent and persistent rejection of my acquaintance. I have not been accustomed to such treatment; and, as Mr. Piers possesses to the full the masculine horror of being bored and opposed, she drives him to seek amusement in more congenial society. However, I am not implacable, and, as she has wisely chosen so good an envoy as yourself, I am willing to make terms.'

'I am no envoy,' cried Laura; 'I come here on my own responsibility—on my own unsuggested impulse.'

'Be that as it may,' resumed Madame Moscynska coolly, 'I will tell you to what I can agree. I had been hesitating between a visit to my uncle at Dairysford, or a *séjour* with some friends who have famous sporting quarters near Presburg, when Mr. Piers kindly offered to escort me to Hungary—far too agreeable a proposition to be declined—and as Mrs. Piers's absurd conduct made Dairysford a less desirable abode than it otherwise would be, I decided not to go there. If, however, I can be sure of her treating me with civility, and allowing the current of our lives to run smoothly and pleasantly, why, I have no objection to the neigh bourhood of Pierslynn for the winter, and I have no doubt I—we—can persuade Mr. Piers to burn his

yule log and eat his Christmas pudding in the halls of his ancestors.'

She leant back in her chair as she finished speaking, playing with the ends of her lace scarf, surveying her visitor with calm, deliberate contempt.

The audacity of this speech roused the hottest indignation in her hearer. Laura felt her cheeks glow with shame and anger—shame that she should sit there and dispute with a hardened woman—dispute what? Winnie's right to the companionship of her own husband—anger that she should dare to propose such a compact. She had indeed made a mistake in attempting to win over such a woman, and she greatly feared that when Winifrid came to know of her visit, she would be terribly vexed and mortified. But at least Madame Moscynska's conduct and avowal would give her the right to back up Winnie in her resistance to the intimacy which her husband sought to force upon her.

There was nothing left but to end the interview, and she rose with a confused throng of angry, bitter thoughts crowding her brain.

'I have wasted your time and my own,' she said. 'You know I can promise nothing for Mrs. Piers; your own proposition—your own words—justify her conduct. If you are not inclined frankly and voluntarily to repair the mischief you certainly have done, nothing I can say will make you.'

She turned towards the door as she spoke.

Madame Moscynska laughed a low pleasant laugh.

'But, my dear Miss Piers,' she said, 'is this not "much ado about nothing"——'

The door opening interrupted her, and Reginald Piers came in unannounced, and in a leisurely familiar way. At the sight of Laura he stood still, a look of the greatest surprise changing his usual indifferent expression to one more animated.

The Princess laughed again, this time with real merriment.

'Your *entrée* is quite dramatic, *mon ami.* You little thought that I was to have the honour of a visit from your cousin when you left me this morning! Pray do not run away, Miss Piers, the moment the bone of contention appears. Let us have the murder out.'

Laura hesitated an instant, and then stood her ground.

'Yes,' she said, 'Madame Moscynska, I am quite willing you should tell everything to Reginald before me.'

'What the deuce is it all about?' cried Reginald, the colour rising to his cheek. 'What has brought you here?'

'A very serious mission,' said Madame Moscynska with quiet sarcasm. 'Miss Piers wishes to put us all right; she wishes to save you from the dangers and iniquity of a journey with so worthless a personage as myself. She wishes to enable your very charming wife to have her own way in rejecting the friendship of your friend, and yet to receive all the same devotion as though she yielded to your

wishes; and as to myself, she wishes to see me penitent—converted from the error of my ways, and finally shut out from contact with such pure pearls as her cousin and herself.'

'By heaven, Laura!' cried Reginald, walking quickly across the room to the fireplace, where he took his stand upon the rug, 'you have made an awful fool of yourself! Pray, did Winifrid send you? or was it your own unassisted wisdom that planned this attack?'

'You are right, Reginald,' said Laura. 'I have indeed been foolish—foolish in disputing Winifrid's opinion—foolish in believing that such homely, narrow views as mine could influence so accomplished a woman of the world as—your friend.'

'I hope I deserve the epithet, dear Miss Piers,' said Madame Moscynska blandly. 'At any rate, I do not believe that in the eyes of *my* world a journey anywhere with Mr. Piers will injure my reputation. It is good for so much.'

'And do not suppose that such ill-bred meddling will effect anything except to widen the breach you seek to heal!' cried Reginald. 'Nothing shall make me forego my intention to show the slight civility of accompanying a lady whom I sincerely regard on a long tedious journey, and you may tell my wife so.'

Madame Moscynska laughed a small triumphant laugh.

'Yes, Reginald,' said Laura, turning very pale, but facing him with steadfast eyes. 'There *is* some-

thing that may change your plans—your life. Before you outrage your wife's feelings and risk your own reputation, read some letters that were addressed to me from Australia by a man who knew you well but is now no more; you will then perhaps admit my right to dictate your conduct in this matter.'

As she spoke the light of anger died out of Reginald's face; he made a step forward and then stood absolutely still, a strange, dazed, startled look in his eyes. Laura kept the same position; and Madame Moscynska, raising herself from the attitude of repose which she had assumed, looked with no small curiosity from one to the other.

CHAPTER XIV.

REGINALD, after an instant of stunned silence, laughed aloud—a harsh wild laugh.

'Well done, Laura! when you uncart a bogie you are right to make it indefinite. What may these mysterious letters be, and from whom? Do they exist in a day-dream, or a nightmare?'

'I will tell you all when we are alone,' said Laura in a low voice, for she was frightened at her own words; and with a slight bow to Madame Moscynska, who sat upright, holding the arms of her chair, as if roused or excited, she left the room.

It was done, then! The irrevocable words, respecting which she had thought and planned so much, had burst from her without premeditation, almost involuntarily.

She walked on unconscious of the busy crowd around, the question perpetually beating as if with an iron hammer on her brain—'Have I done ill, or

well, for Winifrid? Have I saved him—or driven him to recklessness? Have I in any way loosened or contracted the hold that woman has on him? When I see him again, how shall I bear to look on him in his shame and degradation? He who was so bright—so chivalrous once—my hero—my beloved!'

Laura was stirred to her innermost depths. But out of the truth and tenderness that lay at the root of her character, she gathered the fruit of courage and resolution; she had begun, and she must finish. If—if only the shameful reality could be kept from Winnie, if she could be left the comfort of loving her husband! If, in the present stage, Reginald could be restored to her, she would and could forgive his passing infidelity; but such a stain as she (Laura) could reveal, would it not eat out the heart of love, and leave nothing but discoloured husk? How should she so guide the complication placed in her hands as to save all concerned?

For the moment she utterly lost sight of Madame Moscynska. She felt instinctively that her words had raised a white terror in Reginald's heart that no witchery of woman could exorcise. Pondering these things, she walked on, mechanically avoiding collision with those she encountered, but deaf and blind to the present. She was aware she had reached the hotel; but, with a half-unconscious design to escape contact and conversation, she passed the door and paused at a crossing a little beyond it which led to a gate of the Tuileries

Gardens. There was a throng of carriages, and she waited for an opportunity to traverse the street. At last she succeeded, and had descended the steps of the opposite terrace, still harassed by the agitated thoughts she could not bring into order or sequence, when a quick step gained upon her, and, looking up, she saw Reginald Piers beside her.

'Laura! I insist on your explaining the extraordinary speech you have just made.'

He was deadly pale, and his eyes looked wild and eager.

'My explanation involves a long story, Reginald, and one that can be told to you alone. Where can I find an opportunity?'

'Here!' said he, with fierce impatience. 'We shall be safe from observation, and listeners, at the other side of the garden. Come; I am anxious to know what you allude to.'

They walked in silence to the terrace that overlooks the Seine, which is generally almost deserted.

'Now,' exclaimed Reginald, 'we are effectually alone—speak!'

Laura slowly raised her eyes to his.

'Reginald,' she said, 'I have known for some time that my grandfather was married. I have seen and copied the entry of his marriage in the register of St. Olave's Church. My father was born in wedlock. *I* am therefore the rightful owner of Pierslynn, and I am determined to assert my right.'

They had stopped beside the wall as if looking into the river beyond. Reginald drew back a step. His lips opened, but no sound came from them; a wave of colour rushed to cheek and brow, and, clenching his hands on the light cane he carried, he exclaimed:

'Great God! is this revenge?'

'No,' returned Laura sadly; 'it is justice.'

'But how do you mean to prove that the entry in the register you have seen is that of your grandfather Geoffrey Piers's marriage? The name is not so very uncommon,' said Reginald, looking intently at her, and casting from him the fragments of his cane, which he had unconsciously snapped in two.

'Because the fact of the marriage, with the place and date corresponding to the entry, is communicated to the woman in whose house Geoffrey Piers and his supposed mistress are known to have lodged, and where my father was afterwards born, in a letter which is in my possession.'

'It is a forgery—a falsehood!' exclaimed Reginald hastily—scornfully. 'No such document exists. How did it come into your hands?'

'I found it in the keeping of a man to whom I was directed by——'

She paused, almost terrified at making the last avowal which would show Reginald that she knew all his treachery.

'A letter written just before his death by a man whom you knew—James Holden. He told me, what I would rather forfeit many fortunes than

know, that you and he together visited the church, and examined the register—so—so——Ah, heaven, Reginald! what tempted you?'

She broke off, almost choked with sobs.

'Come on,' said Reginald hoarsely: 'we shall be noticed standing here.'

They walked a few paces in silence, then Reginald said, in tones that made every syllable a separate curse:

'The lying traitor! How can you believe a word such a fellow would write?'

'Reginald,' said Laura, in a low earnest voice, 'it is useless to argue. I know my rights, and I will maintain them. God knows how bitter it is to me to know all this, but——'

'It is all over with me,' interrupted Reginald, stopping suddenly and sitting down on a bench by which he paused. 'I am at your mercy.'

He leant his elbows on his knees, supporting his head on his hands, and gazing away into the blank disgraced future with a look of such gloom, such hopeless despair, that Laura's heart ached for him.

'You cannot believe that I will ever be merciless to Winnie or to you. Her lot is bound up with yours.'

'My God, Laura!' cried Reginald, turning to her, 'your obstinacy in refusing to marry me has ruined us both! You would have made me a most admirable wife: you would have kept me straight; you would not have worried my soul out with senseless jealousy. By heaven! I never intended to

wrong you, Laura. I intended to give you Pierslynn and myself into the bargain, for you loved me in those days; only I was such a weak infernal idiot that I could not hold my tongue, and I lost you.'

'Is it possible *you* can be such a traitor to the sweetest, fairest wife a man could have, as for an instant to wish me in her place? How can you be false to *her*, even in thought? How can you even temporarily prefer hackneyed wit and conventional elegance to her bright nature and fresh loveliness? No; I cannot express my pity and indignation! Your very senses seem blunted; and I loved you so much once, Reggie, that I believe it costs *me* more to tell you this terrible history, than *you* to hear it.'

'You were always something different from other women, and I still trust you, Laura; yet life is over for me. I wish to God I was out of it all, and lying at the bottom of the river there!' he said bitterly, as he rose, and went to lean over the parapet. 'I have never known an hour's real happiness from the day you broke with me; though I was wild with joy when I had really won Winnie. She is all you say—yet I always dreaded half unconsciously that you should find me out.'

There was silence for a few minutes. Laura felt her tears welling over as she noticed the crushed cowed look that his whole face and figure had assumed. At length he roused himself, and, turning round, exclaimed:

'If then, Laura, you are inclined to be friendly and forgiving, we may compromise matters; we might quietly share the property during our joint lives. I might relinquish a couple of thousand a year, and leave a declaration that would secure the inheritance to your children should you ever marry. We might live abroad a good deal, and no one be any wiser.'

Laura shook her head.

'No, Reginald; you must leave the terms to *me*. I must have a far more equitable arrangement. But it is time we returned. I shall write out my plan and suggestions; in these you may help me. You must remember that I hold you and all you possess in my grasp; you have no alternative but to agree to what I propose, except so far as your legal knowledge may enable you to improve upon my ideas. Nothing can be done here. Return with us to London, and try to soothe Winnie: she is your best friend, your best defence; and she loves you still—so much.'

He did not answer till they had walked a few paces.

'I *am* in your hands,' he said; 'but, tell me, are you absolutely certain you never let the smallest hint of this infernal affair ooze out?'

'Never!' exclaimed Laura; 'your honour is as dear to me as my own. I will save it yet.'

'My honour!' repeated Reginald, with unutterable bitterness. 'Look here, Laura; I owe Wiel-

itzka some money, and—and—the Princess, too—not much—some bets at cards, you know.'

'I trust not a great deal; but, for heaven's sake, get clear of them before we start.'

'You must wait a day or two.'

'Settle that with your wife.'

Another pause. The grey mist of a November afternoon was rising softly among the dark brown trunks and bare twigs of the trees like a ghostly presence; a dull continuous roll from the streets pervaded the air, like an angry moan over the irrevocable past.

'I ought to thank you, Laura,' said Reginald, as they approached the exit from the gardens—he spoke in a constrained voice—'I see you are generous; but the bitterness, the disgrace of the whole thing, rage at my short-sighted folly, poisons my soul. I am incapable of gratitude, of anything but a blind fury against myself—against everything—even you.'

Laura could not reply; how could she comfort him or reconcile him to himself? Yet her just anger was fading before the rising glow of pity for the criminal, little as she knew he deserved it.

'Let us try to wipe out the past,' she said at length. 'Of one thing be sure; I will guard you from suspicion; I think I can, but you must be guided by me.'

Reginald bent his head sullenly.

'I shall see you this evening,' he said. 'We must keep everything dark to Winnie—poor dear Winnie!

but I will leave you now, Laura; I—I must be alone.'

He turned abruptly, and walked quickly away in the direction of the river. Laura looked after him with a momentary uneasiness, but soon assured herself there was no need for anxiety. All Reginald's rage and regret was against his own failure and detection, not remorse for his robbery of herself.

Her chief sensation was relief that the dreaded avowal had been got through, and it had come about easily after all. Yet had she not felt the pangs of shame more keenly than the offender? Did he indeed realize that she was determined to assert her rights? His rather audacious proposal to give her about a third of her own, and keep the affair to themselves, did not look like it.

These thoughts brought her to the door of their hotel. She felt faint and exhausted, and forced herself to swallow some food and wine; then, as Winifrid had not yet returned, she took refuge in her own room. Little more than two hours ago she had left the Louvre nervous with a degree of uncertainty as to the wisdom of the bold step she contemplated; and now the Rubicon was passed, and she was fairly launched on a wave of circumstance which might lead her—where? But she felt calmer and stronger; things looked more promising for Winnie. She might be happy after all.

* * * * *

'Laura dear, you are not feeling unwell?' said

Winnie's kindly voice at the door, after a space of quiet, how long Laura did not know.

'Come in. I had a slight headache,' she returned, opening to her friend; 'a mere nothing.'

'A picture gallery is always fatiguing,' said Winifrid, walking to the fireplace and putting her foot on the fender. She was very pale; her heavy eyes, the sad curve of the sweet mouth, all bespoke hopeless depression.

'You are tired too, are you not?' asked Laura.

'Yes, a little,' with a sigh. 'We did a good deal of business, Farrar and myself; we got sundry little presents. I need not forget my friends, even though I feel as if I had done with the world.'

'You have not done with the world yet, dear Winnie,' returned Laura cheerfully. 'I trust there are brighter days in store for you.'

'*You* are looking brighter, at any rate, Laura,' said Winifrid, gazing at her more attentively. 'There is some sort of change in your face—dear old face that I know so well! Have you heard anything new?' this with a little eagerness.

'No, nothing whatever new. Let me see what you have been buying.'

* * * * *

As on the previous day, Winnie and Laura sat down *tête-à-tête;* but they had scarce finished their soup when Reginald joined them.

'I did not intend to be so late,' he said, placing himself at table; 'or are you extra punctual?'

Winifrid was silent. Laura made some slight

reply respecting the difference between watches and dinner proceeded somewhat silently.

Reginald addressed himself principally to his wife; asked with languid but kindly interest where she had been; and, Laura could not help observing, avoided her eyes as much as possible, looking away even when he spoke to her.

When coffee had been served and the waiter departed, Reginald, whose composure and easy tone moved Laura to surprise and a certain degree of admiration, suddenly observed—playing with his spoon and looking rather steadily at the tablecloth:

'If you do not mind waiting till Thursday, Winifrid, I will go to London with you. I find the spring is a better time to visit the Zaradoski stables than the present season, and I dare say there is lots to do at Pierslynn.'

He brought out this last word with an effort perceptible to Laura.

Winnie's eyes sparkled for a moment, but the light quickly faded as she replied:

'Of course, Reggie, I will wait any time you wish, so long as you fix it.'

'Very well—Thursday morning, then; we can stay a few days in London and see my mother.'

'Certainly, that will be very nice; and, Laura dear, you must come on with us to Pierslynn,' cried Winifrid, who could hardly believe her ears; 'you do not know how charming Pierslynn is in winter. By the way'—for she had suffered too

much to believe readily that her troubles were over —'is Lord Dereham to have a large party this year?'

Laura understood this leading question.

'I believe not. I did hear he was to winter at Nice.'

Another brief silence; then Reginald shivered visibly, and pressed his hand to his head.

'I think I have taken cold,' he said; 'I am burning, yet chilled; my head aches. I think I will go and lie down. Should anyone call, I do not wish to be disturbed; and, Winnie, would you mind presently coming to bathe my brow with eau-de-cologne and water? you remember at Florence nothing did me so much good as your application of cold water and eau-de-cologne.'

'I will come in a few minutes, Reggie. I hope you are not suffering much.'

'I dare say I shall be all right to-morrow,' he returned, as he left the room.

As the door shut, Winifrid changed her seat to one next Laura, and laid her hand upon her cousin's. She was trembling all over.

'What can it mean, dearest Laura, this wonderful change? I dare not trust it.'

'It only means that Reginald has taken time to reflect, and his better self has conquered. I *would* have hope now, were I you. Go to him, Winnie, and soothe him as much as you can. I think he is unwell and suffering.'

* * * * *

Laura went slowly into the *salon*, and sat down by the fire, intending to wait a while in case Winnie returned, or sent for her, planning in her own mind, the while, how she should frame the scheme she had promised to write out for Reginald. Presently the waiter came in with the letters just arrived by the evening post.

Several for Reginald; one for Winnie, with a French stamp; and one addressed in Mrs. Crewe's writing to herself, containing an excellent report of the Admiral, and brimming over with curiosity as to the details of the illness of the poor dear baby, who had been, Mrs. Crewe was always convinced, very much mismanaged. The letter concluded with some small details touching Topsy and Collins, which brought the quiet cosy home in Leamington Road vividly before Laura; and she sat lost in thought, contrasting the moral cyclone which had suddenly wrapped her in its wild eddies with the simple tranquillity of her past life—of the serene future, to which she looked with such sweet certainty; while, though keenly alive to the tragedy which Reginald had brought upon himself, she could not help smiling as imagination pictured the excitement, the curiosity, the exultation of Mrs. Crewe when the time came for the great revelation.

Here Winnie broke in upon her reflections.

'Reginald wants to know if there are any letters for him,' she said.

'There are several,' said Laura, pointing to them; 'the post has been in some time.'

'I know most of these,' said Winnie, looking over them. 'There is one from his lawyer, and from Lord Dereham; and this is a circular, and this is from the steward at Pierslynn.' She sighed as she said the name.

'Are you very fond of Pierslynn?' asked Laura, looking at her with a strange yearning pity.

'No, not particularly. At first I thought I was going to love the place; but I suffered so much there—it is so associated with those first agonizing doubts. But who can this be from? it is a foreign-looking hand.'

She opened the letter addressed to herself, and looked at the contents, her countenance changing as she did so.

'This is very extraordinary,' she said. 'Listen to this, Laura:

'"MADAM,

'"I think it right to inform you that your husband prefers to remain in Paris because he is in the toils of a fascinating woman, well known in certain circles both here and in London, who resides not far from you; she intends to take him with her on a distant journey. I warn you that once away from such influence as home still exercises over him, the lady in question, and the staff of bloodsuckers connected with her by various ties, will never leave their hold till they have reduced your husband, and through him yourself, to beggary and worse. Madame —— has but

one object—to get and to spend money; and, as she cannot work altogether without help, she is obliged to share with the infernal crew to whom she is linked. You have hitherto resisted bravely the attempts made to draw you into the net. Make a strong effort now to rescue your infatuated husband, who is every day getting more and more involved in the meshes of a woman who never yet cared to have a poor lover. Do not quit Paris without him. All is arranged for the departure of Madame —— and her victim on the 2nd, and once gone, he will never return to you.

'"Your sincere sympathizer,

'"—— ——"'

The cousins looked at each other in silence for a moment. Winnie was the first to speak.

'In one sense it is a false alarm,' she said. 'For some reason or other Reginald is determined to come with us on Thursday. Whether the Princess has made any new arrangement, I cannot tell; but there is a change for the better in Reggie's heart, and he is very unwell.'

'Then you will take no notice of this? Anonymous productions seldom deserve any.'

'I do not know,' returned Winifrid thoughtfully; 'I believe every word in this letter is true as far as that dreadful woman is concerned—and Reggie too,' she added with a sigh. 'Not that he deliberately intended to leave me for ever; and, you see, he is really true at heart—at least, I begin to hope so. I

wish he could see the letter; it might be a warning. I think I will show it to him, and say, "I know it is false, because you are not going to leave me."'

It was late that night before Laura attempted to sleep. She wrote steadily for a considerable time, occasionally pausing to think, but making few corrections. At length she folded up and sealed a thick letter addressed to Reginald Piers, which she shut into her writing-case, and then crept quietly to bed.

CHAPTER XV.

THE few days which intervened before Mr. and Mrs. Piers and suite left Paris for England were evidently busy ones to Reginald. He did not, as formerly, absent himself for the whole day and often much of the night; but he wrote a good deal in his own room, and came to and fro, as if greatly occupied. Laura had easily found a moment when she could give him the memoranda she had prepared, unseen by anyone.

'Read it carefully, Reginald,' she said. 'When in London we can discuss the subject thoroughly, and arrange our plans.'

Reginald had merely replied, 'We will do so,' and thrust the packet into an inner pocket.

These days were some of the most painful Laura had ever spent.

To observe how Reginaid shrank from meeting her eyes, to see his pale downcast look, the indescribable beaten aspect, which his wife attributed

to indisposition; all this was infinitely distressing. It seemed to her as though she was herself bowed down by the shame she had been obliged to bring upon the hero of her early youth. Do what she would, she could not think of him without compassion, and the keenest sorrow for her shattered ideal.

The first time that Winifred was quite alone with her and safe, which was the day following the receipt of the anonymous letter, as they were driving in the Bois (for Winnie was suddenly anxious to take all means to recover her strength and spirits), she said:

'I gave the letter to Reginald last night, Laura. He was so restless I did not think it could make him worse; he was lying on the sofa, for he did not go to bed; he walked about and sometimes lay down. I said, "Here is a strange letter I have just had," and added the words I said I would speak. I did not make the least scene. He read it, but was not so angry or upset as I expected. He seemed as if occupied about something else. He read it twice through, and examined it and the envelope carefully. "It is very extraordinary," he said. "Who can have written it? She has many enemies, but this is too much; the misrepresentation is ingenious." Then, after a pause, with a sort of effort he went on: "You were right, Winnie, to show it to me; you will leave it in my hands?" "I never wish to see it again," said I. "You have yielded to my wish, and I am ready to trust you!"

Ah, Laura! that was not quite true, but I will try to make it true. He put out his hand and drew me down to him. "I believe you are a wise as well as a good woman, Winnie," said he; "let us try and make the best of each other. You have a generous heart. Would you—could you—still care for me if I were old and sickly—and—and poor, Winnie?" Oh, Laura! I never had such a struggle not to make a scene. My heart yearned to him; and yet it burned, too, with anger, to think that for all the indifference he had shown even in my cruel sorrow, all the agony he must know he had inflicted on me, he never said, "Forgive me; let me atone to you;" but I knew that my—our—only chance was in at least *seeming* strong. So I replied, "When you are old, Reggie, I shall be old too; and for the rest, you know me, and you need no answer." "Yes, I think I do know you." He kissed me kindly, but still as if his mind were full of something else. "Go away to rest," he went on; "I fear you have had but little sleep of late. I will send for you if I feel worse; but I am not ill, Winnie—only uneasy." He looked so ghastly pale, with an expression as if he saw some far-away horror, that I could not resist putting my arms round him. "Reggie," I said, "let me help you, if you need help, for I *can* love you still." He pressed me to him for an instant, and said in a low hoarse voice, "Good-night—God bless you."

The last words were interrupted by irrepressible sobs.

'Have I done well, Laura? D done wisely?'

'It seems to me you have d Reginald is not more yours t before, he is unworthy of you,' re warmth, contrasting vividly in her own truth and earnestness of the wife with the slight, selfish nature of the husband.

Winnie sighed.

'It may all come right,' she said. 'But I shall never feel quite the same again, though he is still very dear to me. I have an odd sort of pity for him; I think he has been under a spell.'

* * * * *

It was a dry crisp evening when they reached London. Though Winifrid begged Laura to stay with her still, the latter decided to go straight to Mrs. Crewe's. She thought it better for husband and wife to be alone together; and she felt sure her absence would be an infinite relief to Reginald, as it was to herself not to see him.

The simple yet not ungraceful homeliness of Mrs. Crewe's house never before seemed so delightful as on her escape from the false position, the unavoidable mask, which her relations with Reginald compelled her to assume. The transparent honesty, the natural kindliness of tone which pervaded the small establishment, produced something the same effect as breathing mountain air after being imprisoned in a back alley of a great town. Everything and everyone was *en fête* to receive her.

The door was thrown open by Collins, who grinned with pleasure, and displayed Mrs. Crewe in a most becoming cap, standing under the lamp with Topsy under one arm, and behind her the Admiral in the doorway of the dining-room.

'My darling girl, how late you are! I began to fear there was an accident or something. How tired you look! I am sure we are delighted to have you back. Here is the Admiral, quite wearying for you, and this dear cat wandered about looking for you for two or three days.'

This speech was broken by sundry hugs; and then Laura was passed on to the gentler and more subdued greeting of her kind guardian.

'Come in, my dear,' continued Mrs. Crewe; 'you evidently need refreshment. How is the poor young mother? Ah! I have no doubt that poor infant was sacrificed to wretched food and improper treatment in a foreign country. Collins! make haste with Miss Piers's chop and the buttered toast. I would not let her put it down till you came, dear; but the fire is clear, and it will be ready in ten or fifteen minutes,' etc.

'Oh, how nice it is to be with you again!' said Laura, the tears springing to her eyes as she looked back at the agitating scenes through which she had passed.

'I am sure, dear, it must all have been very trying,' returned Mrs. Crewe. 'But Winifrid is young, she will soon recover; and I have no doubt you had every comfort and elegance about you that

money could get. Mr. Piers is a very liberal young man, and quite the gentleman; still, I flatter myself your heart is in our humble home.'

'It is, indeed,' said Laura, with a smile and a blush. 'Tell me, dear Admiral,' taking his hand again in hers, 'have you been well, quite well, since I left?'

She looked at him earnestly, for his face seemed pale and worn.

'Not quite so robust as usual,' he said; 'but I am nearly myself again, thanks to Mrs. Crewe's kind care.'

'He was very seriously ill,' cried Mrs. Crewe; 'bronchitis, and I do not know what. I wanted to send for you, but he would not hear of it. Come away and take off your things while Collins is getting your supper ready.'

When they had reached the privacy of Laura's room, Mrs. Crewe was in her element.

'You see, my dear girl, I have taken advantage of your absence to make a few improvements. I hope you like your new curtains. You see they are real curtains. You can draw them across; the old ones were a mere bit of drapery, to take off the naked look. I had a woman in the house to make them, and a machine. I am going to buy the machine, paying for it by weekly instalments; isn't that a convenience? I have calculated that if we do with half a pound less butter and only two puddings a week, I can pay for it in twenty-six

weeks; so I have told Collins she must use the nice clean dripping both for herself and cooking.'

'Indeed, Mrs. Crewe?'

'Wait a bit, my dear. Look here—I have bought you another chest of drawers, polished deal, you see, and bevelled edges; got it such a bargain—not that I would mind what I spent on you; you are my own dear daughter, though you are not my son's wife yet. *He* is no weathercock, like finer gentlemen—no chance of *his* changing; but you see, dear, I am very anxious to save a little money, and I have begun to lay by. Why, you have hardly noticed Toppy, and the dear pet quite knows you,' etc.

* * * * *

The following day Mrs. Crewe proposed to pay a visit of condolence to Winifrid.

The preparations for this ceremony were considerable, and in proportion to what Mrs. Crewe thought was due to the rank and fashion of the person to be visited. Laura therefore excused herself for preceding her good hostess, as she had promised to be with her cousin early, for Mr. and Mrs. Piers intended to make a very short stay in town. The dowager Mrs. Piers, too, was expected that evening on her return from the Grange, where she had been staying with her daughter, so this was about the only free day at Winifrid's disposal.

Laura was anxious to see how Winnie had borne the fatigue of their hasty journey, but still more so

for some communication with Reginald as to their future plan of action. It was now four days since she had given him her ultimatum. How earnestly she hoped he would be honest and straightforward with her, for she knew that his whole future depended on the secret of his weak dishonesty being preserved.

Winnie had not yet risen when Laura reached the hotel. She had been greatly fatigued, her maid said, and Mr. Piers had persuaded her to rest. Laura was admitted immediately.

The curtains were partly drawn to exclude the light; but one ray of sunshine fell upon the pillow and lit up the face which lay upon it, and Laura was struck by the subtle change that had come to the well-known countenance.

It had a pale loveliness, a grave composure, a steadfast look which took from its youthfulness, while it added beauty. It was the face of one who had tasted the bitter fruit of the tree of knowledge, and from whom the glorious unsuspecting simplicity of Eden's inexperience had passed away for ever.

'Law 'm,' cried Farrar, 'the sun is in your eyes,' and she hastened to exclude it; but the impression remained with Laura, and revealed to her that Winifrid had entered a new stage on life's journey, where courage and patience had replaced hope and joy.

'How good of you to come so early!' said Winnie, holding out her hand. 'I hardly hoped to see you so soon. Am I not lazy to be here? But

Reginald begged me to rest, and I did not like to contradict him. After all, I have nothing to get up for. How did you find everyone?'

For a while Winnie listened with some interest to Laura's details; then her attention wandered, and her eyes became distrait. Laura paused, and there was a short silence, which Winnie broke, speaking in a low dreamy tone, as if to herself:

'I seem to miss my poor little baby-boy more than ever here. I was so happy, so full of brightest hope, when we left London not five months ago! and now, all is so changed, myself most of all; I seem to have no occupation, no hope. I thought, just now, why should I get up? I have nothing to do, no duty to perform.'

'It is natural you should think so at present; but you will knit up the ravelled skein of your life, and find new interests and occupations, dearest Winnie, later on.'

'I hope so—I do hope so.' Another short pause. 'Do you know, Laura,' she resumed, 'I feel strangely uneasy about Reginald. He looks so ghastly white, and has such a curious fixed, almost despairing, expression, and I cannot get him to open his heart. Believe me, something occurred in Paris, of which we know nothing, which cut him up awfully, and made him change his plans. I wish I could find out, not from curiosity, but that I might help him or comfort him. I feel uneasy if he is out of my sight, and he is very little in it. But he is kind, indifferently kind.'

A short deep sigh interrupted her, and she went on.

'He had a letter from Madame Moscynska this morning. He was sitting here talking to me when the letters were brought up; and, though he shuffled them all together, I caught a glimpse of her writing—I could not mistake it, but I took no notice. I do not want to tease him when he seems so unhappy. So long as she is at a distance I do not fear.'

'I do not think there is much to fear,' said Laura thoughtfully, 'except that Reginald may have been losing heavily at cards enough to account for his gloom.'

'I am sure I should not mind that, if he would stop now,' cried Winnie. 'I should not mind being poor, if we could only be all and all to each other, as we were once—ah! for how short a time!'

'I do not think Reginald would like poverty,' said Laura; 'I hope you never will be poor. But, Winnie, if you do not intend to receive Mrs. Crewe in your room, you had better dress.'

'Oh yes, certainly! and then I will drive back with her. Poor dear Mrs. Crewe! How I should like to ask her down to Pierslynn; but somehow I do not think she is a favourite with Reginald, and do you remember how savage he used to be to Denzil Crewe? That was because Denzil admired *me*. I always liked Denzil, he is so good and firm. Perhaps it would have been better for everyone if I had married him.'

'I do not think so,' said Laura softly, with a smile that Winnie dimly thought was peculiar.

'Well, then, dear, go into the sitting-room, and I will dress. Perhaps Reggie will come in. He went to the bank, I know, this morning, and I think he will come in to luncheon.'

Laura obeyed, and, taking up the *Times*, looked vaguely through the shipping intelligence. But her own thoughts were more interesting. Winnie's utter unconsciousness of the coming reverses touched her deeply. Perhaps the fire of trial might draw her and her husband nearer; perhaps detection might work a moral revolution in Reginald; yet she did not feel very hopeful. There was something callous, something disappointing, in the way he had taken the terrible tidings of her discovery and intentions. Again, was it not rather hard to judge justly of a man so stunned, so paralyzed, as he must have been? While she pondered these things, the door opened, and the object of her thoughts walked in. His appearance warranted his wife's uneasiness, but he did not seem surprised or disturbed by Laura's presence.

'I returned in hopes of having a word with you,' he said, after a slight greeting. 'The less you and I put on paper to each other the better; but I want to arrange a meeting when we can talk long and uninterruptedly, and then I must get away the day after to-morrow to Pierslynn. I, too, have a proposition to make, but I will not put it on paper.'

'I will meet you where you wish,' said Laura,

feeling her usual dislike to encounter his eye, or to speak with him.

'To-morrow,' he resumed, 'Winnie spends the day with my mother; meet me at the Charing Cross Hotel. I will have a private room, and we can talk as long as we like.'

'Very well,' replied Laura; 'Charing Cross at two?'

'Yes, at two. I need not make a note of our rendezvous,' he added with a bitter smile; 'it is not likely to slip my memory.'

A short embarrassed pause ensued.

'Is Winnie up?' he asked.

'Yes, and nearly dressed. She expects a visit from Mrs. Crewe.'

'Does she? Then, I shall be off; I am in no mood to stand her nonsense.'

'Do you dine here to-day?' asked Laura.

'I am not sure; I think not. Why? can't you stay with Winnie?'

'I was going to say that if we can persuade her to dine with us it would be a great pleasure, and perhaps be a useful change for her.'

'I dare say it will; try and persuade her. Poor girl! it was an evil hour for her when she fell in with me!'

'Do not say so. You may make her happy, be happy yourself yet. Do not lose heart, Reginald.'

He made a slight despairing gesture, and after a moment's silence said:

'Be sure you bring those letters with you, Laura. I only want to read them,' he added hastily.

'You may take them with you to read,' said Laura, colouring with pity for the self-abasement that suggested the assurance. 'You cannot think I would guard against *you* as against an enemy?'

'You had better,' he said hastily. 'I cannot answer for myself.'

Further speech was prevented by the announcement in loud tones by one of the waiters:

'Mrs. Crewe!'

Whereupon that lady entered, smiling and serene in the consciousness of being well dressed, in her best dress, bonnet, and mantle.

Reginald summoned sufficient self-control to greet her cheerfully, and she greatly enjoyed the ensuing hour of condolence, sympathy, and cross-examination. Finally she was made quite happy by Winnie's ready acceptance of her invitation to dinner, and carried her off to spend a tranquil afternoon which soothed and strengthened the sorrowing young mother.

* * * * *

The following morning Laura sallied forth, feeling as we may suppose men feel who volunteer for a 'forlorn hope' or any other desperate undertaking; yet she nerved herself to pay a visit to her first patron, from whom a fresh commission awaited her on her return from Paris, on her way to Charing Cross.

Reginald was loitering at the bookstall when she entered the crowded station. When he turned at her greeting he looked curiously at her for a

moment; then led the way into the hotel and asked for a private room, to which they were shown.

'Bring me pen and ink, and some brandy and soda,' he said to the waiter. 'Will you not take something to eat, Laura?' he continued.

'I am too anxious and distressed to eat.'

'You are wonderfully changed,' said Reginald, leaning on the back of a chair, and looking at her with calm scrutiny. 'It struck me with new force when I met you just now; there is a quiet power and composed manner about you quite different from your old shy coldness. Ah! there is no use in looking back. Have you brought the letters, and other documents? Let us get to the bottom of this infernal business as soon as we can.'

'They are all here,' returned Laura, drawing out the packet. 'First, here is Holden's letter, and the few lines which accompanied it and announced his death. The note mentioned as enclosed I gave up when I got the packet described; the rest are the papers it contained.'

As Reginald perused the lines traced by Holden's dying hand, Laura observed how his grasp on the paper tightened, and his pale cheek flushed and then grew white. She felt herself trembling with the terrible internal tremor of irresistible emotion. It was a horrible experience to sit there, and watch the man she had once passionately loved thus reading his own condemnation.

Holden's letter finished, Reginald laid it down silently, and, shading his eyes for a moment with

his hand, took up the next paper presented to him, the short explanation appended to the documents deposited at Winter's; and so read on through the whole, paleness spreading over his face, but retaining a degree of hard composure.

'The evidence is very complete,' he said, somewhat huskily. 'How did you get possession of these papers?'

'I went alone to this Mr. Winter, and he gave them to me on payment of a fee.'

'Then he made no difficulty about giving them up?'

'Not the least.'

'Which proves that Holden kept counsel; otherwise a kindred spirit and chum of such a fellow would have been making terms with me before Holden was half-way to Australia. I begin to hope the secret is between us alone; that is the best in a bad business.'

'And with me you are safe,' said Laura, in a low tone.

'I believe it,' returned Reginald, and walked once to and fro in silence. 'Laura,' he then broke out hurriedly, in a changed voice, 'I do not want to whine and cry "*Peccavi!*" I know how I must seem in your eyes! I can never right myself with *you;* but I want to say—I *must* say—how impossible it is for *you,* a calm-natured, untried woman, to know the bitterness of having *such* fortune within my grasp and see it wrenched away! That beggar Holden always hated me, I don't know

why; I scarcely felt his existence; but if I hadn't been such an infernal idiot as to leave the Pierslynn pedigree with West to show him the day my wonderful luck first dawned on me, he would never have dreamed of any connection between me and the Geoffrey Piers whose history was known to his aunt. When the facts stared me in the face, I felt I could *not* give up Pierslynn. Look here, Laura! No one knew it, but ever since my boyhood I had dreamed of inheriting the family estate. I had silently watched for Hugh Piers's marriage, and every year that saw him still unwedded, swelled my hopes. I was man enough to keep quiet and seem reasonable, but I was in the wildest fever of mad joy when I read of the poor fellow having broken his neck. I had had the character of being light-hearted and easy-going. I am *not!* I am proud and luxurious and passionate, and I hated my life. When I found that Captain Edward Piers, *your* father, was legitimate, I resolved to secure myself by marrying you, as I told Holden I would. I did not want to rob you quite; I liked you well enough, better in fact than any girl I knew, for I had never been what is called in love—I mean, real wild sort of love; and although I should have preferred social rank, I was not at all averse to a home with you; and you loved me, Laura; you scarcely knew it, but you always loved me! Why were you so obstinate in delaying our marriage? All, all might have been well. Once your husband, I should have got over my frantic passion for Winnie; you would

have been wise and good. Remember,' he went on, with cynical frankness, 'I do not say I should have been a model of fidelity, but you would have been my prime counsellor and best friend. *Why* did you not marry me, Laura?'

'Because I suppose you were to be saved from the crime of breaking my heart and Winnie's,' said Laura severely. 'I do not think you are aware what depths of selfishness you are displaying!'

'Am I?' he returned indifferently. 'Well, I shall say no more about myself. But, by heaven, I did not intend to rob you! I meant you to be Mrs. Piers, of Pierslynn, surrounded by all that could make life pleasant, and a moment of infernal madness, my cursed ill-luck, betrayed me! However, it is useless to try back; let us see what conclusion we can come to.'

He sat down at the table, and drawing out the paper Laura had given him before leaving Paris, unfolded it, and seemed to read the lines for a minute or two in silence.

'Your plan is ingenious,' he said at last, 'and generous. You propose to place all these papers in my hand, and to let me account for their possession as best I can, leaving it to me to announce the discovery of your rights, and so pass before the world as a just and honourable man.' He smiled bitterly.

'I should certainly come clean out of the affair. I ought to jump at it. But, Laura, you are not an

ambitious woman! You are not avaricious. Could we not hush up the business in some other way? You love my wife, and would not like to push her from her place. Can you not leave me—us—Piers-lynn for my life? I would agree to give you a handsome income, and should you ever marry and have children, I would secure the succession of the estate to them. I am encouraged to propose this by my knowledge of the extreme simplicity of your tastes, the noble disinterestedness of your nature. Wealth and station *cannot* have the value for *you* they have for *me!* Laura! for the sake of "auld lang syne," for our old friendship's sake, do not be too hard upon me!'

Reginald stretched out his hand suddenly, and grasped hers hard as he ceased to speak, gazing at her eagerly.

She felt a strange mixture of compassion and contempt. That he should degrade himself by such a speech seemed incredible; was all the wealth of England worth such abasement?

'I am not hard on you, Reginald,' she said sadly, as she withdrew her hand. 'I wish to spare you, but I *will* have my rights! You have not thought of what you suggest! Suppose God gives you other children? How cruel it would be to bring them up in expectation of an inheritance that could never be theirs! and how could I account for receiving an income from you, on whom I have no claim? Do you not think such an arrangement would point suspicion on your honour and on mine?'

Reginald sprang from his seat and walked to and fro restlessly.

'But, Laura,' he exclaimed, resuming his chair again, 'if these cursed lawyers get their fingers into the caldron, they will stir up all kinds of mischief! They will tell you you can claim all the money I have spent since I held the estate; they will want to know what I have done with it; and, Laura, I must *not* have that question raised!'

'Can you not trust me, Reginald? Do you think I would really injure you? Do you think I would ask for any of the money I fear you have squandered? Be a man, Reginald! put the past away from you—lay hold of the future. You have that in you to win a place yet, as good as what you lose now; but I am resolved to prove my father's legitimacy, my own claims, and—you are in my hands.'

She spoke low, but with indescribable force and distinctness, with a flash of spirit, of unconscious command, that startled her cousin as a revelation.

He rested his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands. When he looked up, there was a sullen, beaten look in his face, that made Laura's heart ache.

'As you will,' he said, in a low tone, and paused again. 'Now, to settle how we shall carry out this tragi-comedy. I shall take these letters (if you will trust them with me), and say I found them among old papers belonging to John Piers, the late man's father. It so happens there are several letters

from Geoffrey Piers, your grandfather, respecting his son. One tells of his removal from Llanogwen to a school near London; another describes his having had a severe attack of fever; and the third, in 1831, when he must have been ten or eleven, entreats the friendly protection of the head of the family for his poor solitary boy, who would soon be an orphan, as he (the writer) feels his end approaching. By putting all together in the same old yellow envelope, no one will suspect that all were not originally wrapped up together.'

'That will do admirably!' exclaimed Laura. 'What will your next step be?'

'I suppose the correct thing will be to go in a state of agitation to my solicitors; they will probably communicate with you and propose a compromise; but I think it will be well to inform you myself, in a burst of cousinly confidence, this is for further consideration.'

He paused; and Laura, not knowing very well what to say, employed herself in folding up her grandmother's letters and the memoir of Deborah Pryce, which she handed to Reginald, carefully returning Holden's to her pocket.

'You have still evidence enough there to send me to penal servitude,' said Reginald, bitterly. 'Look here, Laura; can you wait a month for the assertion of your rights? because I want to get Christmas over. My mother wishes us to stay with her; and—and—my poor mother! to come back to the narrow life she thought she had escaped for ever!'

Again he covered his face.

'Reginald!' cried Laura, 'she shall suffer no pecuniary loss, I promise that; as to the rest, take your own time. One point more: for God's sake let no cloud come between you and your wife! she loves you so much. Cast away every thought that can draw you from her. Is she not tender and good, bright, companionable?'

'She *is!* She is lovely and lovable, pure, true; but God, Laura! you do not know the magic there is about a clever, unscrupulous, subtle woman, who fears nothing, and knows everything, and is always ready to put that knowledge to the best account to amuse, to pique, or soothe the man who interests her, either as a tyrant or victim. With the help of such a witch as that, not even *you*, Laura, would have wrenched Pierslynn from me. No *good* woman ever fascinates as such a syren does, at least a man of my nature!'

'Ah! is there, then, no place in your heart for Winnie—dearest, sweetest Winnie, whom you sought so eagerly and——'

Laura burst into tears.

Reginald looked at her surprised.

'This is a curious situation,' he said coldly; 'my old love entreating me to love the woman who supplanted her.'

Laura, who was overstrained and exhausted, still sobbed.

'Don't!' exclaimed Reginald at last; 'I cannot stand tears, and I *do* love Winnie! I was always

happy with her when we were alone together. I love her a deuced deal more than half the married men in England love their wives! Now, we have not much more to say; only, before we part, tell me to whom *you* are engaged.'

'Engaged!' repeated Laura, astonished; 'what induces you to think I am engaged?'

'Your regard for your rights! If you had not some other interest beyond your own to care for you would not have held out so stoutly.'

'You are mistaken,' returned Laura, startled into composure, while her cheek glowed, and the tears still hung on her eyelashes. 'Under *any* circumstances, I should have stood upon my rights—as a mere act of justice. I could not be party to a fraud.'

Reginald looked intently at her as she spoke, and in his turn flushed, but grew pale quickly. In spite of Laura's effort to be steady, her eyes sank under his.

'You have not really answered my question. Laura, tell me who it is you are going to marry. I am convinced you are engaged. There are, to my mind, a thousand indefinable indications in your countenance, your bearing; *who* is the man, Laura?'

'If I am engaged, Reginald, it cannot concern you.'

'It does!' he exclaimed fiercely. 'The secret of my life will soon be at the mercy of a stranger, a natural enemy.'

'It will not, I solemnly promise, Reginald; not

even to a husband, if I ever have one, will I betray you.'

Reginald paced the room rapidly, an expression of despair and rage in his face.

'I know what such promises are worth,' he growled between his teeth; then suddenly stopping opposite to her he exclaimed in a high strained voice, 'By heaven, Laura! you are going to marry that sailor fellow, Crewe!'

'Why do you think so?' she asked.

'I cannot tell, but I know it. God! to be at *his* mercy! Probably he already knows his *fiancée* is a wealthy heiress.'

'Yes,' said Laura gathering courage. 'I *have* promised Denzil Crewe to be his wife; but he has chosen me as I was—plain, insignificant, *poor*. He has not the faintest idea of what I know; and, believe me, he *never* shall. Your reputation is as dear to me as though you were my brother. You cannot know *how* I shrink from exposing you! Trust me, Reginald; you *must* trust me!'

'I have no choice,' he said gloomily. 'But of what value is life to me now? Would it not be wiser to end this wretched tangle? Laura, you have been my ruin! Had you married me at once, all would have gone well;' and he again paced the room like a wild animal. 'What is life to me?'

'Much,' said Laura somewhat alarmed, but venturing to catch his arm. 'The future may be yours if you will. Your life belongs to Winnie. Banish the past from your mind; act in the living

present. If you manage well, not a suspicion will attach to you. Reginald, you will atone to me for *everything* if you will take up the broken thread of your career, and make a place for yourself, as you can if you choose.'

Reginald flung away from her and threw himself into a chair. A few minutes' silence ensued. Then, rising, he said in an altered voice:

'Come, there is no more to be done. You give me till the new year to make my arrangements. Winifrid remains with my mother; I shall come to and fro, and will find an opportunity to get those letters from you at the last moment. It is as well you keep them now.'

He rang vehemently for the waiter, and continued:

'You had better leave without me; and, Laura, I am not ungrateful. You have been generous: we can never be enemies, but I would never willingly meet you again. Give me your hand, and—remember, I was sorely tempted.'

'Good-bye, Reginald. Do not despair—and—keep your heart warm with love for your best friend—your wife.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE weeks which ensued would have been very pleasant to Laura but for the *dénouement* hanging over her. She saw Winnie frequently, and Reginald scarcely at all. But she was gratified by observing that the former seemed more tranquil and content; she looked better and fresher, and appeared to be on more friendly and confidential terms with her mother-in-law than formerly.

Winnie—kindly, real, true—was always a frequent visitor in Leamington Road, and was ere long entirely restored to the Admiral's favour, while she became A 1 in Mrs. Crewe's estimation. Reginald revolved between Pierslynn and London, and no hint of the Polish Princess disturbed the smooth surface of their lives.

Meanwhile letters from Denzil cheered the hearts of his mother and his *fiancée*. It was Laura's first love-letter, and, although a rational production, its tone of deep tenderness, the details of his daily life

poured out with the confidence fond affection alone could create, made her heart swell with pride and joy. It was but a few days arrived when he wrote; for he had already time to gather that although he found matters in a bad state, they were less complicated than he expected. He therefore hoped to finish his work in about six months, as his longing to return to the home he knew awaited him grew more intense the further he went from it.

This letter made Laura burn to tell him all the events of the past few weeks, but she resolutely resisted the wish. She would never betray Reginald to a man who had always, in her opinion, undervalued him; the name and fame of her old love were precious deposits that should never be breathed upon if she could help it. As Winnie's husband too, he was, if possible, to be preserved, and lifted over the chasm which had suddenly opened under his feet.

One cold rainy afternoon in the first week of the new year, Laura, on returning from her morning's walk, was greeted by Mrs. Crewe with the news that 'Mr. Piers was closeted with the Admiral; and mark my words, Laura, something extraordinary has happened! That poor young man had quite a scared look.'

'Indeed!' said Laura, affecting to be occupied with her wet umbrella to avoid scrutiny. 'I will take off my hat, dear Mrs. Crewe, and join you immediately.'

The Admiral did not heed her; he stood by the fire holding Laura's hand in both his own.

'My dear child, it has pleased God to send you a great, a totally unforeseen change of fortune. Your cousin Reginald has just now told me that in looking carefully through his predecessor's papers, a task he had too long postponed, he came upon a packet labelled "Geoffrey Piers' letters," within which was a second parcel carefully sealed. On examination it proved to contain the certificate of your grandfather's marriage, some letters describing that event, written by your grandmother, and some other letters and papers, which prove, Reginald says, beyond a doubt, that you are the real heir of the Pierslynn estate, as you descend from the elder brother of Reginald's grandfather. This, of course, if all turns out as he anticipates, will bring a terrible reverse upon your relatives; but Reginald, with the decision of an honest man and a true gentleman, lost no time in laying the documents before his solicitors, who yesterday examined the register of the church (somewhere in the City) where the marriage is stated to have taken place, and there they found an entry corresponding to the certificate. Your father is thus proved legitimate. It requires but a few formalities, therefore, to establish your claim.'

He stopped; and Laura, trembling almost visibly, could hardly utter the words:

'This seems incredible. I feel terrified at so extraordinary a reverse.'

But Mrs. Crewe could not restrain her excitement.

'*Laura* the owner of Pierslynn! *Laura* the real head of the family! the ways of Providence are past finding out. Why, my dear Admiral, no romance in Mudie's library can equal this. And will the house and grounds, the carriages and the horses, the—the pictures and the family jewels, all belong to Laura? I do not seem able to believe it;' and Mrs. Crewe rose from her seat and went to put all the antimacassars straight as a sort of outlet to her emotion.

'I can hardly believe it myself,' said the Admiral, still holding Laura's hand and looking with some anxiety into her pale agitated face. 'I am by no means sure how we ought to feel in these strange circumstances. It is a sore trial to Laura, it is a terrible blow to Reginald Piers. Let us keep our minds calm and anticipate as little as possible. Messrs. Greenwood, Mr. Piers' solicitors, have sent down an agent to the village in Wales where your father was born, to ascertain if his birth is registered there, and how. Meantime, the deepest source of regret and anxiety to Mr. Piers is that he has spent so much of *your* money, as he calls it. Not only three years' income, but a large amount of his predecessor's savings. This is but natural.'

'I am sure, if this strange story proves true, he need not distress himself about what he has spent. *I* will never trouble him,' cried Laura.

'So I ventured to assure him,' said the Admiral gravely, as he drew forward a chair for her. 'Such

unconscious appropriation carries with it neither guilt nor blame.'

'I suppose not,' said Mrs. Crewe, returning to the fireplace and gazing with a profound air at the comfortable blaze; 'but, though I say it myself, I can see a little more below the surface than many, and it seems to me very extraordinary: first Mr. Piers' tremendous haste to marry our dear Laura here, then the breaking of the engagement, then this discovery. You see, if he *had* married you, Laura, he would have still been master of Pierslynn, whatever happened.'

'Oh, Mrs. Crewe!' interrupted Laura in a tone of genuine horror, for the suggestion terrified her.

'My dear Mrs. Crewe,' said the Admiral, with some severity, 'you should not permit yourself even to think so uncharitably, and I must add unjustly. It was entirely in this man's power to suppress and destroy the evidence which robs him of his fortune. When he discovered these documents he was alone with his own conscience, visible only to the All Seeing of whose presence I fear he is but little mindful. Had he burned these papers he would never have been found out, as no suspicion seems to have existed that Geoffrey Piers ever married the girl who was Laura's grandmother; in short, and even to a man of principle, there was a certain degree of temptation in such a moment. Reginald has surmounted it. I trust for all our sakes, Mrs. Crewe, you will abstain from such thoughts and expressions.'

'You must know, my dear sir, that your wish is law to me,' returned that lady, unabashed. 'I do not intend to express myself to the same effect again; but not being as good and holy as you are, or as high-minded as our dear Laura, though I should scorn a mean action, I am perhaps a better judge of worldly matters than either of you. However, be my opinions what they may, I shall keep them to myself.'

'To your opinions, dear Mrs. Crewe, you have every right, only pray be careful in forming them;' then, turning to Laura, the Admiral continued: 'Your cousin recommends that you should put yourself in the hands of Messrs. Thurston and Trent, as it is right they should prosecute inquiries and see that everything is properly and legally carried out. I therefore propose to accompany you to their office to-morrow morning. Till then let us try and divert our thoughts somewhat, for I cannot yet quite believe that Reginald's rights can be upset. If any doubt remains, he says he will defend them.'

'He ought,' said Laura thoughtfully. 'Are there not sometimes amicable suits where both parties are simply anxious to ascertain the truth?'

'I suppose there must be,' returned the Admiral.

'I will go away to my own room,' said Laura. 'I feel as if I must be alone; I am overpowered by the sudden strangeness of my position!'

'God bless and guide you, my dear Laura,' said the Admiral, laying his hand on her head as she passed him.

'Would you take a glass of wine, and then lie down and try to sleep?' asked Mrs. Crewe anxiously, as if she had met with an accident.

'I want nothing but a little quiet thought,' returned Laura; and then with a sudden impulse she threw her arms round the kind woman's neck and kissed her affectionately as she left the room.

* * * * *

The rest of the day was curiously constrained and oppressive. The Admiral having advised avoidance of the subject uppermost in their thoughts, conversation proceeded intermittently, and the hours seemed to Laura preternaturally long. She was in some ways relieved to think that the first much-dreaded steps had been taken towards righting the foul wrong to which she had been subjected, yet she was terrified at being launched upon the rapids of such a startling course. Moreover, the sense of playing a part weakened her courage. She was especially desirous that all things should seem so clear and natural that Denzil's suspicions might not be roused.

'My dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, as they went upstairs at night, 'I feel as if I should burst. Do let me come in and talk to you.'

'Yes, certainly, come in,' returned Laura, opening the door and lighting the candles on the dressing-table.

'To think of it all is too astonishing,' continued Mrs. Crewe, sitting down on a smart ottoman which was really a bonnet-box.

Laura took a low cane chair and resigned herself to listen, while Mrs. Crewe proceeded to remove her lace cravatte and fold it up with mechanical, unconscious care as she spoke.

'To think of you, who were in a manner of speak-pooh-poohed and snubbed, and made little of, being head over them all! That poor conceited set-up Mrs. Piers, the dowager as she liked to be called, as if she were a duchess! I really *am* sorry for her! Won't she be ready to cut her tongue out for having refused to receive *you* for a daughter-in-law. She is incapable of seeing your worth as *I* did, and was glad to welcome you without a farthing! Well; it's not every heiress that knows she was chosen for herself alone, as you know my dear blessed boy chose you; and when I say, Laura Piers, you deserve him,' added the mother, with a little sob, 'I give you the highest praise you will ever get, be the other what it may.'

'I think you do,' said Laura, drawing nearer and taking Mrs. Crewe's hand, which she stroked gently.

'Never forget that he chose you out of pure disinterested love,' continued Mrs. Crewe emphatically, 'and he does love you, my dear, with all his heart! I saw that before you did. I wish he were here to advise and support you in the present extraordinary crisis. What do you think, my love? shall he have to take your name?'

'I know as little as yourself, Mrs. Crewe. I should much prefer to take his.'

'And you are right, Laura,' she returned, with grave emphasis, as she unpinned her cap and set it on her knee, where it produced an uncanny effect, as if she were holding a supplementary head. 'The Crewes are a good old family, though not in the peerage, and a truer gentleman than my dear boy never came of any stock, though adverse circumstances compelled him to enter the mercantile marine. Well, well, good luck comes to him at last! He gets a dear good wife and a fortune into the bargain; for I feel sure, my love, nothing will make you break a promise once given!'

'I hope not,' said Laura, with a faint smile, for she saw the drift of her kind friend's conversation. 'Nothing save Denzil's own wish would induce me to break with him.'

'And there is small danger of that!' cried Mrs. Crewe, kissing her with warmth. 'But, my dear, what will Mrs. Reginald Piers say? It will be an awful trial to her. I hope and trust she will keep friends with *you*, and not run away with the idea that you ought not to assert your rights, and all that sort of thing.'

'I do not fear it,' replied Laura thoughtfully. 'She has too much sense;' but even while she spoke, a dim fear arose in her heart and chilled it.

'I am not so sure,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'We are seldom just or reasonable about those we love as she loves her husband. Depend upon it, she will be awfully cut up at the idea of his loss and mortification, for though he carried it off with frank care-

lessness, he was tremendously proud of Pierslynn and his position. I changed *my* opinion of Reginald Piers a good deal lately, and in spite of what the Admiral says, I think the whole affair very strange—very strange indeed.'

'It does not seem so to me,' said Laura—'at least, in the sense you mean. But it is impossible that Winifrid and I should fail to understand each other; and after all, our speculations may be quite fruitless. Some fresh discovery, some new combination of circumstances, may occur to sweep away my pretensions; let us not dwell upon them.'

'That is not at all likely. I consider your claim indisputable. I wonder if Mr. Piers has got through much of the savings! I believe there was a considerable sum in hand. Do you think, dear, you will have a town as well as a country house?'

'Oh, Mrs. Crewe!' said Laura, laughing, in spite of the anxiety and trepidation which oppressed her. 'Such a question never occurred to me. Indeed, I feel too much for Reginald and Winnie to think how the change will affect myself.'

'Very pretty and praiseworthy indeed, my dear. But—listen; there's Toppy crying to be let in. It is a wet night. What an intelligent creature she is to be sure! I'm coming, my precious puss, I'm coming. Good-night, dearest Laura. I have kept you too long out of your bed.'

* * * * *

The interview with Messrs. Thurston and Trent

(for both partners shared the important consultation) was a severe trial to Laura.

The surprise of both gentlemen was very great; indeed, it was several minutes before even Mr. Trent's keen faculties could assimilate the facts reported.

'These succession cases are often very extraordinary, and few can surpass the present one *if* matters turn out as you seem to think they will,' he said.

'Very remarkable—very, indeed,' observed Mr. Thurston, playing with his eye-glass; 'awkward discovery for a man to make; yet, after all, perhaps less mortifying than to have it made by another. At any rate, it puts Mr. Piers's reputation beyond a shadow of doubt.'

'Yes,' returned Mr. Trent, tapping the table thoughtfully with a paper-knife; 'he acted as any honourable man would. Of course, I am glad enough of your good fortune,' to Laura. 'But, at the same time, I feel sincerely for Reginald Piers; it is a tremendous blow.'

'You must direct me how best to soften it to him,' said Laura, in a low voice, feeling strangely guilty, and perceiving clearly enough that with the usual masculine *esprit de corps*, the partners thought it a deplorable freak of fortune that a fine estate should pass from the hands of a capable man to those of a woman, and a plain, quiet, unremarkable woman to boot.

'Of course we shall be happy to manage the case for Miss Piers. Admiral, the sooner so impor-

tant a matter is settled the better. I will call on Greenwood this afternoon, and ask to see the papers. There is no use in making any plans or suggestions till we ascertain how you really stand, Miss Piers. It is really a curious affair, very curious. I shall let you know the result of our conference to-morrow morning.'

'This will be a startling piece of news for my wife,' said Mr. Trent, as he escorted the Admiral and Laura downstairs. 'She is in Dresden with our youngest boy and girl, as you know, for the winter. She was asking about you in her last letter. They do not return till April.'

'My best regards to her,' said Laura. 'I shall be glad to see her again.'

After a few more words, Laura and her guardian bade Mr. Trent good-morning and walked away homewards.

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'Well, I confess I am profoundly sorry at this discovery,' said Trent to Thurston. 'Just as Piers was preparing to stand for —— and settle down into an active country gentleman.'

'He has not been very steady to the country as yet,' replied the other drily. 'He was always running abroad and hither and thither.'

'What an unlucky slip it was for him to have let his engagement with this girl fall through! Of course, we thought him a fool then, and I must say as far as beauty goes he has changed for the better.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Thurston, 'perhaps; but I find Miss Piers a very interesting young woman.'

'She will be extremely interesting to many now,' replied Mr. Trent. 'I doubt if this fortune will be a real gain to her; some sharper will marry her for her money.'

'We must hope for better things,' rejoined his partner, as Mr. Trent closed his blotting-book and prepared to go out.

CHAPTER XVII.

IT was still early when Laura reached home. She felt utterly uncomfortable and at sea. She could not settle to any of her usual occupations. Her whole life was upset. The lines of her existence would need to be laid down afresh on a broader gauge. One question she revolved anxiously in her own mind: should she write at once to Denzil, or wait to impart the great news until he returned home?

Her great longing to see him, to have the comfort and support of his presence and counsel, inclined her to write without delay, and on this she finally decided. But looking into her heart, she found, that first disturbed uneasy day, that the source of her discomfort was the fear of finding Winnie changed towards her, and misunderstanding her. She hesitated to go and see her, for she shrank from meeting old Mrs. Piers, as she did not know if her son had yet announced his unfortunate discovery.

The promised report from Mr. Trent did not

reach his new client till the day after her visit to him, and then he merely said that the proofs of her claim seemed most satisfactory, but that he was sending down an agent to examine the baptismal registry in the church of Llanogwen. On the return of this *employé*, Mr. Trent would like to see her again.

* * * * *

The day following the receipt of this note, Laura was writing a long letter to Denzil in her own room, intending to finish it after her next interview with Mr. Trent, if matters then seemed conclusive.

A tap on the door disturbed her. In reply to her invitation 'Come in,' the door opened to admit Winifrid.

She looked pale, and her large eyes had a distressed alarmed expression.

'Dearest Winnie! how rejoiced I am to see you!' cried Laura, holding out her arms to embrace her. 'I have wanted so much to come to you.'

'Ah, Laura!' said Winifrid, her lips quivering, 'what is all this that Reginald has been telling me?'

'What has he told you?' was Laura's counter-question, as she drew her cousin to a chair and placed herself beside her.

'Oh, I can hardly believe it!' cried Winifrid. 'That Pierslynn is yours; and all—all that we possess. That Reginald has been unconsciously keeping you out of your own; and now he must give up all to you. Laura, dear Laura, it is not

that I would rob you or wrong you; but, oh! I feel it is hard, desperately hard, on Reginald. I am sure, if you had only yourself to think of, you might—— But I do not know what I am saying; you see Reggie has nothing in the world he can call his own, yet he has been so luxurious in his ways, and I am of so little use to him. Oh, Laura! what can I do to help him?'

'Dearest Winnie, do not cry or make yourself miserable. Do you think I could be happy, and know that you and Reginald wanted for anything? Let us take counsel together, dear, and settle what will be best for you. I cannot help asserting my own rights. It is inevitable. Reginald could not consent to retain Pierslynn at my pleasure. He can, he will, make a place for himself. He will be in a better position than he has yet filled, and he will be more your own.'

'He has been all that I can wish in his hour of trial,' sobbed Winnie. 'So noble, so just to you; and all I ask is to be of use and comfort to him, but he is awfully cast down. Neither of us know how to break the terrible news to his poor mother. It will kill her.'

'Believe me, she shall not suffer,' said Laura. 'I have determined she shall lose nothing by her son's change of fortunes; my first care shall be to secure independence to her and to you.'

'I am sure you will be kind and generous; but, Laura, it is very bitter to "give up," even to you!' and Winnie shed some irresistible tears. 'For

myself I do not care. Indeed, indeed, I do not; wealth and grandeur brought me nothing but trouble. But to see *him* so pale, and still, and downcast, is terrible. Yet I have had some moments of exquisite delight. Last night, when he told me all, he laid his head upon my shoulder and said, "But I have *you* left, and you will always be the same, tender and true." So you see he must love me best of all! Then, Laura, I may assure him that you will not forsake him—that you will not rob him of everything?'

'No, my own dear cousin; I will be just, and it is only justice in me to take care of your future,' returned Laura, observing with a certain kindly cynicism how completely the idea of Reginald, his losses, his trouble and suffering, swallowed up every other idea; even she herself was utterly overlooked; only, thank God! there was no bitterness or resentment in Winnie's simple heart against *her*.

'I am sure, I was always sure, you are kind and just,' returned Winnie, with a little quivering sob.

'Winnie, dear,' said Laura, anxious to change her thoughts, 'try and find out what Reginald would like to do, and where he would like to live, and so soon as matters are settled and I have some command of money, we must look out a nice home for you. I cannot be happy till I know you are comfortable.'

'You *are* good and kind, Laura! Oh, do help me to keep Reginald in London! He said something last night of hiding ourselves on the Conti-

nent, but I do not want that! I know what it means—annihilation for an Englishman, and worse for *us*. Oh, Laura! how old Mrs. Piers will rage, to think that she prevented Reginald's marriage with you!'

'I am sure no one else regrets it now,' returned Laura, with a smile.

'I feel more comforted,' said Winnie presently; 'I wish dear Reginald did not look so despondent. Shall I ask him to come and talk to you, Laura? I am sure you would do him good.'

'No, dear Winnie; situated as we both are, I think you had better leave him to himself. However, assure him from me that I am his true friend.'

After a short silence Laura, to divert her listener's mind, confided to her that she was engaged to Denzil Crewe, a piece of news which roused Winifrid's interest. She was greatly astonished, for her imagination always depicted Denzil as mourning the loss of herself. She was kindly and sympathetic, however, and full of all good wishes. But the dominant thought was of the strange freak by which Pierslynn and Laura would pass into Denzil's hands.

'And Mrs. Crewe! What a state of excitement she must be in! Oh! I cannot meet her to-day, Laura! I am not strong enough.'

'You need not, dear; she is out.'

'And I will go before she returns.'

'Let me know when you have broken the news

to Mrs. Piers,' were Laura's last words as Winnie kissed her warmly and went quickly away.

* * * * *

The ensuing weeks were crowded with business visits and consultations at Messrs. Thurston and Trent's office, perusals of leases and examinations of accounts, discussions of plans and preparing of deeds. All the forms and technicalities of law seemed to spread their tentacles round Laura and her guardian. Yet no obstacle presented itself to her quietly taking possession of her property.

Meantime Parliament met, and the world of Mayfair had a few days' pleasant excitement over the Pierslynn romance. The society papers gave it a paragraph or two, and then a fresher topic drove it from the field.

Laura's provision for her disinherited kinsman satisfied the lawyers on both sides; and Reginald, as he gradually realized how wonderfully he had been saved from the effects of his own dishonesty, began to pluck up courage and cheerfulness. Laura and Winnie found ample and interesting occupation in seeking a house, as Reginald consented to reside in London, though he was somewhat slow in forming, or avowedly forming, his plans. So time went quickly on.

The greatest sufferer was Mrs. Piers. Her pride was deeply wounded, for she had always cherished a species of dislike to Laura, born of pique and resentment, at the indescribable superiority which she most unconsciously maintained, in spite of

Reginald's desertion and her own position as a poor relation. To have this offshoot of the family put over her son's head—in his place—filling the eye of the country which had hitherto been fixed on him, was too much. Not even the generous readiness with which Laura secured to her for life the same income her son had settled on her could atone to her for the infamous usurpation, as she considered such an unfortunate exception to the ordinary rule of succession in the male line. Her mental sufferings culminated in a bad bilious attack which afforded anything but agreeable occupation to Winnie, who was her kind nurse.

From the time Laura had written a full account of the events here recorded to Denzil Crewe, she was intensely anxious for his return. Her own plans must all remain in abeyance until she could consult with him.

The Admiral, perceiving this, sought an interview with the head of the house to which Denzil had been lately admitted a partner, and ascertained that there was no pressing need to prolong his stay. Moreover, when informed of the fortune awaiting his junior, the 'worthy principal' rapidly advanced from civility to cordiality—declared he would write by the post which left next day, and exhort Mr. Crewe to return as soon as possible, and hoped that he would not desert the firm.

Meantime Laura looked eagerly for a reply to her letters written early in January. The great trial of distance is the length of time which must elapse

before an answer can be received; while the chances and changes of this mortal life go on ever accumulating, till the answer, when received, is almost too old to be applicable. How often Laura calculated that March would be in its first decade before her long report could be in Denzil's hands, and before his reply could possibly reach her the last of the spring months would be half-way through. Surely his next letter would announce his coming! Laura would not hear of taking personal possession of her house and lands. 'Let time accustom people to the change of owners,' she said, 'and then I will slide into my place.'

So she lived in the same simple fashion as before her accession of fortune, and time rolled swiftly on.

* * * * *

May was past its prime, still no letter had reached Laura. The China mail was a couple of days overdue, and she suppressed as much as was in her power the uneasiness and dread that gnawed at her heart. Mrs. Crewe was less restless; all the future was bathed in sunshine to her, and she had gone one evening at this time with much pride and delight to the opera, for which Laura had procured two stalls, and begged Mrs. Crewe to let her stay at home, and to take Miss Brown in her place. Mrs. Crewe had started triumphantly in the congenial character of a patroness.

The Admiral had retired to his own room to

proceed with a work he had lately undertaken, chiefly for Laura and Mrs. Crewe's benefit, a sort of commentary or explanation of the 11th chapter of Revelation, for which he was under the impression special light and guidance had been vouchsafed him.

Laura had taken refuge in her painting-room, and begun half mechanically to work at the picture of 'Sunset on the Beach,' which she had never finished, but which was inseparably associated with the happy day when she had sketched it. It was a labour of love to touch and retouch it, while she lived over again in memory the few exquisitely happy hours that succeeded Denzil's avowal and their acknowledged engagement. That was indeed a pure unmixed joy, but the good of this sudden accession of fortune was doubtful. And then, she thought, would Denzil approve the measures she had taken? Would he be dissatisfied with her for thus acting on her own judgment without reference to him? Yes, they were of one mind, one faith! She laid aside her palette as she thought thus, and sat down by the window, through which came the perfume of the many blossoms in Mr. Brown's carefully kept flower-beds. How often she had looked out upon those little garden plots on which her windows opened in bitterest despondency and self-distrust! Even now she rejoiced with trembling; for how could she tell what the future had yet behind its mysterious curtain? So she wandered into dreamland, forgetful of the present,

and deaf to a confused murmur and stir which by-and-by arose from below. A sudden sharp knock recalled her to herself. Almost before she could say 'Come in,' the door flew open and Denzil stood on the threshold—Denzil, browner and thinner than he was when they parted. An instant's breathless pause of astonished delight, and then she sprang forward and was locked in his warm loving embrace, silent from excess of feeling. While she clung to him, all reserve or coyness was swept away by the startling rapture of this sudden meeting—feeling that every doubt and difficulty was at an end now that *he* was present with her!

'At last my love—my life!' said Denzil huskily, as she gently withdrew from his long passionate kiss. 'And I am dear and welcome to you?'

'Oh, *how* welcome!' cried Laura, struggling with the tears that would force themselves from her full heart. 'It *has* been weary waiting! When, how, did you come?'

'When I had your letter of January,' said Denzil, still holding her to him, 'I had already nearly finished my work, for I had pushed on as energetically as possible. I was devoured with eagerness to reach the home I knew was waiting for me, and there was not much left to settle; so, as the same mail brought me a very friendly communication from my partners desiring me to return as soon as possible, as they understood my private affairs required my presence, I determined to answer your letter in person. There were a few days to spare

before the next mail went. I managed to start by it, reached Falmouth last night, and here I am.'

Then came a confused exchange of question and answer, and Laura eagerly poured out. something of the load she had longed for him to share.

When they had somewhat calmed down, Denzil, after a short pause in their quick-flowing talk, exclaimed:

'For one circumstance I do especially thank Heaven. It is that you were pledged to me *before* this extraordinary discovery took place. I should have been barred from aspiring to the wealthy heiress; but *you* know, my darling, you were as rich a prize to me the day you put your hand in mine, as if you gave me the gold diggings of California with it. There is no use to explain this to you, yet I should not have liked to pose before the world as a fortune-hunter.'

'*I* should not have thought you one; what matter for the rest?' said Laura, with a happy smile.

'Nevertheless, I am glad it is so,' said Denzil gravely. 'I am not at all pleased you have inherited this property, Laura.'

'I am not sure that I am either,' she returned.

'It is awful hard lines for Reginald Piers and that charming wife of his, and I am glad you have provided for them. But you and I would have got on very well; whereas, now I am bound to make even more money, not to be overshadowed by my wife; yet I dare say we will manage not to interfere

with each other, or clash in any way. It is curious, and shows how unjust the prejudices of personal likes and dislikes make a man; but in my own mind I felt a little surprise that Reginald Piers, feeling himself safe, as he must have done, from every chance of detection, should have acted the honourable part he did.'

'Why should you have doubted him?' asked Laura carelessly, and passed to some other branch of the subject without waiting for a reply.

At last they remembered the Admiral, and repaired to his apartment to pay him a visit.

It was a night long to be remembered—the rapturous delight of Mrs. Crewe on finding her beloved boy ready to receive her on her return from the opera, the joyous supper, the pouring forth of accumulated information respecting the sayings and doings of the last eight or nine months, the boundless content in each other, while Collins, decked with the broadest grins of welcome, waited on them assiduously, and Toppy, after careful inspection, jumped uninvited on Denzil's knee.

The Admiral said a special grace, full of such heartfelt gratitude and thankfulness that Mrs. Crewe was moved to tears.

Is it not well that, for a rare moment or two, life can wear so sweet and tender a smile for the toilers amid its rugged ways! that they may rest and be refreshed, to take up the burden again, to press onward and upward!

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. TRENT'S comfortable house looked itself again. The drawing-room shutters were opened, the newspaper wrappings removed, the chandeliers freed from their imprisonment in holland bags, and, in short, 'Missus had come home.'

It had been, according to his own account, a purgatorial period to Mr. Trent, that winter of separation; but in point of fact the peas in his pilgrim's shoes had been boiled tolerably soft, and both he and his eldest boys found Christmas in Dresden a very pleasant variation from the ordinary festivities of that season in London. Mrs. Trent was not sorry to find herself in her luxurious home towards the end of June, ready to give and accept some dinner-parties before the end of the season, and where she was something quite fresh and attractive after six or seven months' absence; and on the occasion about to be recorded she had arranged a peculiarly *recherché* little dinner for a

party of twelve of her husband's more intimate acquaintances in the upper and middle strata of legal life.

Host, hostess, and guests were in excellent spirits; the service and the viands were equally good; all went smoothly. The first seriousness of eating over, the sharp edge of appetite blunted, conversation flowed freely and brightly; there were several excellent talkers present, and Mrs. Trent knew how to throw the ball. German politics had been ventilated *à propos* of Mrs. Trent's visit, the last remarkable trials were mentioned, curious items of intelligence concerning them discussed, *bon mots* of counsel repeated and a few more perpetrated, and everyone was pleased with him and her self.

'That is a curious story about the Pierslynn property,' observed Mr. Watkins, a rising barrister. 'There have been paragraphs in most of the morning papers about it. Was not young Piers in your office, Trent?'

'Yes; he was articled to us, and was out of his time, but still working for the firm, when his cousin broke his neck and he stepped into the estate.'

'And now he has proved to be illegitimate, or some such thing,' said Mr. Blenkinsop, the well-known parliamentary solicitor.

'Not at all,' cried Mrs. B. 'Some relation, a poor girl who was employed by a milliner—they say, Madame Elise—turned out legitimate, and has a prior claim.'

'You, are all wrong,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing;

'both parties happen to be relatives of mine, and as the story is to the credit of both, I will tell you the facts.'

And in her clear pleasant manner, Mrs. Trent gave what might be termed the principal points of the case.

'Thus,' she concluded, 'the property has changed hands with very little profit to the "gentlemen of the long robe," as the papers say.'

'Very hard on Piers,' growled Thornton, Q.C. 'Could he not get up a case of any kind?'

'Impossible,' returned Mr. Trent. 'He had no choice between destroying the documents and holding his tongue, or giving up his estate. He wisely chose the last, for dishonesty rarely pays; and Miss Piers, who is a very accomplished ladylike girl, has behaved exceedingly well; they had always been on friendly terms. She settles a thousand a year on him and his wife or the survivor of them, and has bought a house for them, also settled on the wife; while she gives Mrs. Piers senior the same income (five hundred a year) that her son allowed her; not promised merely, you know, but legally secured, out of her own power or that of any husband to alter; and what makes it more praiseworthy, Reginald Piers had managed, besides of course spending the income of the property, to get rid of upwards of eight or nine thousand pounds, which were really Miss Piers's.'

'He seemed to live tolerably fast,' said Mr. Thornton.

'He made no great show, and Mrs. Piers did not give me the idea of extravagance,' observed Mrs. Trent.

'Board of green cloth, eh?' suggested Watkins.

'It is impossible to say,' returned Mr. Trent.

'What is the poor devil going to do?' asked Mr. Thornton. 'He cannot live on a thousand a year after spending—— What was the rent-roll?'

'Five thousand.'

'After spending five,' concluded the Q.C.

'No. He is far too shrewd and active a fellow to lie idle. I have advised him to study for the Bar; that was his ambition formerly, but he was too poor to wait for briefs. He is going to take my advice, I believe.'

'I dare say he will do very well,' said Mr. Blenkinsop. 'A man who has reduced himself by his own straightforward honesty will start with a useful reputation; the very circumstance will put him well before the legal world.'

'I remember him,' observed Mr. Watkins. 'He was a very smart fellow, well connected, too. Is he not brother-in-law to that queer little litigious north-country baronet, Sir Gilbert Jervois?'

'He is,' returned Mrs. Trent; 'and he is married to such a charming pretty creature—quite a love match.'

'I hope the love will not fly out of the window under the present circumstances. Love is somewhat of a summer bird,' said the Q.C.

'What heresy! You must not preach false doctrine here,' laughed Mrs. Trent.

'But, by Jove, what a catch Miss Piers of Pierslynn will be!' cried young Richard Thurston. 'She is no beauty, I believe.'

'Beauty or no beauty,' returned the host, 'she is an uncommonly nice girl, and an artist of no mean ability; but she is not in the market; she is going to make a rather indifferent, not to say poor marriage. It seems before this curious discovery made her an heiress, she had engaged herself to the son of the lady with whom she lives. He was captain of one of Gibbs Brothers' ships, and must be a steady fellow, for they have taken him into partnership.'

'What! going to marry a merchant skipper?' cried young Thurston, with contemptuous surprise.

'Impossible!' exclaimed Mrs. Blenkinsop, with horror.

'Will she not listen to the remonstrances of her friends?' said Mrs. Watkins.

'I do not think they venture to remonstrate,' replied Mrs. Trent, 'as her guardian, Admiral Desbarres, makes no objection. I wish it were a better match; but I do not see how she was to break her promise to a man who proposed for her when she had nothing, and was earning her bread, not without difficulty.'

'It is evident,' said Mr. Thornton, 'that the Piers family, to which, I believe, our fair hostess

belongs, are of the *sans peur, sans reproche* order, whose word is their bond.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs. Trent, smiling; 'and in token of my sympathy with my cousin Laura, I have promised to assist at her wedding on the fourth of next month. Give me half a glass more claret, Mr. Thornton, and I shall quaff it to the health of all true lovers, and then we ladies will leave you to discuss profounder subjects.'

* * * * *

Once more the curtain goes up, five years having elapsed since the last act.

Scene—a handsome artistically furnished morning-room, overlooking Regent's Park.

Mrs. Piers-Crewe, fairer, brighter, better looking than of yore (for nothing beautifies like unselfish happiness), is discovered sitting by a writing-table, trying to teach the alphabet to a brown-eyed brown-haired urchin of perhaps three years old, by means of picture-cards thrown on the floor.

'Bring me B, Georgie.'

Georgie, after a short search, proudly produces S.

'No, no, my darling; try again. This,' rapidly printing it on her note paper, 'is the shape of B.'

Master George lies down on his stomach with an air of determination, and after much turning over of the cards selects R.

'That is a little nearer,' said his mother laughing; 'but ——'

'Mrs. Reginald Piers,' announced a staid footman, in quiet livery, opening the door and ushering in

Winifrid—Winifrid charmingly dressed in a spring costume of fawn colour, deepened here and there to brown. She was as handsome as ever; indeed handsomer, with a look of thought in her eyes, a sweet pensive expression upon her lips.

Laura came forward to meet her with the same tender cordiality which time had not altered.

'So you are teaching the poor little fellow already,' said Winifrid, taking Georgie on her knee, and parting his abundant fringe the better to kiss his brow.

'It is as good a play as any other,' returned the mother, 'and he will come to know the letters in time.'

'Perhaps so. I am not so *prévoyante* as you; I never was. How is the Admiral, Laura?'

'Very much the same, weak and averse to take nourishment, but suffers no pain; he seems wonderfully happy. I do not fancy anyone knows how much he has suffered from religious doubts and difficulties; and he told me yesterday, that, instead of bodily weakness obscuring his mind as it was usually supposed to do, his spiritual power seems to grow as his strength declines, and he added: '"I begin already to catch glimpses and hear echoes of what eye has not seen or ear heard." He spoke with such a profound conviction, such solemn joy, that for an instant I felt a strange thrill. What wondrous power there is in religious enthusiasm!'

'There is indeed,' returned Winifrid.

Just then, nurse returned from her dinner, and

gathered up the picture alphabet, and carried it and the infant student away with her.

'Shall you be able to move the Admiral to the country this summer?'

'I hope so. You know there is really nothing the matter with him; he is just burning out, like a flame too strong for what it feeds upon.'

'How terribly Mrs. Crewe will feel his loss!'

'Terribly! she is the most devoted nurse.'

After a short pause Winifrid resumed:

'To turn to a very different subject, do you ever look at the "Births, marriages, and deaths?"'

'Very seldom, I am ashamed to say. Why?'

'Because,' said Winnie, 'the marriage of Madame Moscynska with an American was in yesterday's *Times*.'

'Indeed!' cried Laura. 'It is years since we have heard her name.'

'Ah! I wish we had never heard it,' returned the other; 'she did not leave a blessing behind her. However, when I showed the announcement to Reginald he smiled rather grimly, and just said, "Won't she make his dollars spin!"'

'Well, she has long been removed from your path,' observed Laura, 'and I think—I hope, dearest Winnie—that your life has been tranquil and happy since—since Reginald took so steadily and successfully to work?'

'Oh yes, it has been calm; I should like to see more of *you*, dear Laura; but, I do not know how

it is, there seems always some obstacle to our meeting, save in the morning. I often want Reggie to go out more of an evening; he works too hard, and——'

'Winnie, do not ask too much of human nature. It is not possible that Reginald can care to be much with us. How can he forget that I have pushed him from his place?'

'He ought only to remember your goodness, to be pleased at his own success! Do you know, he has been asked to stand for Thirlstane, near Sir Gilbert's place in the north, and will probably be returned?'

'That will please him; he is naturally a politician.'

'He never seemed to care for anything but pleasure in the old Pierslynn days. How is Mr. Crewe, Laura?'

'Remarkably well; always busy, yet never hurried.'

'I do believe,' said Winnie thoughtfully, 'that you are a very happy couple.'

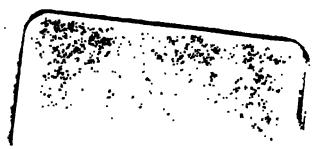
'We are,' said Laura, in a low tone of utter and complete assurance, while her eyes grew moist; 'and,' she added with a smile, 'there were *some* ingredients in our marriage that might have led to little festering jealousies. Mrs. Trent calls us "Ferdinand and Isabella," because we govern our separate kingdoms so independently and yet in perfect harmony. The country rustic rule is mine, the town and commercial division is completely

his; you see, we have such thorough confidence in each other.'

'There lies the secret,' returned Winifrid, with a sigh. 'Though it is only to you I would ever breathe such a confession, there is a certain restraint about Reginald, an impalpable cloud I cannot define, that drifts between my husband and myself. He is kind, he is tolerably well-tempered, he is even at times tender; yet I feel there is a memory or experience of the past that is hidden from me, and the ghost of that forbidden something chills and checks mutual confidence; in short, my hopes, my happiest moments, are with my little girl. Ah! thank God, *this* baby is a girl!'

'But, dearest Winnie!' cried Laura, inexpressibly touched, 'you and Reginald love each other dearly?'

'I think we do,' returned Winnie slowly and sadly; 'yet something has changed in the love of our first happy days; the light of perfect confidence is dimmed, the subtle fragrance of complete trust has evaporated, I know not why. Can they ever be restored?'

THE END.

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